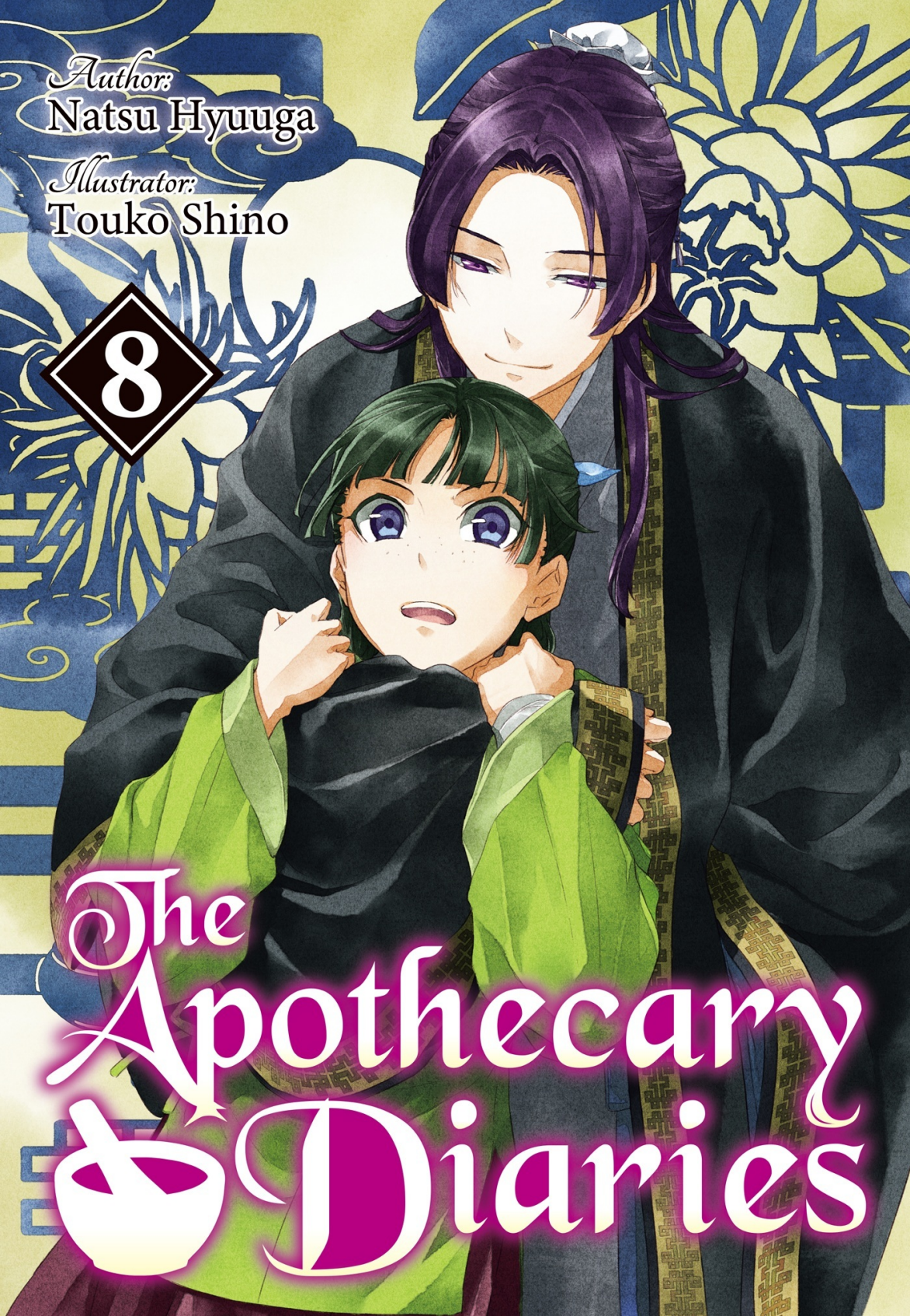
Author:
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustrator:
Touko Shino
8
The Apothecary Diaries

Maomao held up the ginseng triumphantly and spun around.
8
The Apothecary Diaries
Author
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustration
Touko Shino

The next day, Maomao went shopping with Yao and En'en. Their little expedition took them to a commercial district along a main avenue south of the dorm. Shops lined the street, with open-air stalls filling the spaces between them. The place was bustling, busy and alive.

"What
Baryou
is saying
is this."
Maamei
appeared at
that moment.
For a moment
even Jinshi
wasn't sure
where she'd
come from.

Maomao thought as people crowded in to watch the pair on the stage: Jinshi and the man with the monocle. Between them, only a Go board.
This looks oddly familiar,

Luomen listened quietly as Bowen raged. Maomao couldn't imagine the freak would normally have tolerated such an interruption to his game. Maybe he really was feeling unwell.
"These are your son's fingers?"

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Character Profiles

Maomao
An apothecary in the pleasure district. Downright obsessed with medicines and poisons, but largely uninterested in other matters. Reveres her father Luomen. Nineteen years old.

Jinshi
The Emperor's younger brother. Inhumanly beautiful. He can't get Maomao off his mind, but by hook or by crook, she always manages to evade him. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant. Doesn't feel pain as acutely as most people, which gives him far greater physical limits than most have. He's very serious, but that makes him easy to tweak. In love with Consort Lishu.

Gaoshun
Basen's father. A well-built soldier, he was formerly Jinshi's attendant, but now he serves the Emperor personally.

Lakan
Maomao's father and Luomen's nephew. A freak with a monocle. He's a high-ranking member of the military, but his bizarre behavior causes people to avoid him. He loves Go and Shogi and is quite good at both.

Lahan
Lakan's nephew and adopted son. A small man with round glasses, he has a soft spot for beautiful women and will try to chat them up anytime he sees one. He runs side hustles to try to pay off his adoptive father's debts.

Luomen
Maomao's adoptive father; Lakan's uncle. Once a eunuch in the rear palace, he

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now serves as a court physician. He's missing one kneecap, a punishment inflicted on him many years ago.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife. An exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes. Twenty-one years old.

The Emperor
A real go-getter and possessor of prodigious facial hair. Prefers his women well-endowed. Thirty-six years old.

Yao
Maomao's coworker. She's fifteen, but her height and well-developed figure make her look older.

En'en
Maomao's coworker. As Yao's serving woman, she helps in the medical office along with her mistress. She's devoted to her mistress with a love that borders on the twisted. Nineteen years old.

Hongniang
Empress Gyokuyou's chief lady-in-waiting. She works hard, which occasionally leaves her at the mercy of her playful Empress.

Yinghua, Guiyuan & Ailan
Empress Gyokuyou's longest-serving ladies-in-waiting.

Haku-u, Koku-u, Seki-u
Ladies-in-waiting to Empress Gyokuyou, they're three sisters each separated by a year.

Introduction

The Go Tournament

Having recovered from being poisoned in the course of her food-tasting duties, Yao returns to service, and she, En'en, and Maomao go back to their usual work in the medical office. Meanwhile, a book by Lakan sparks a Go craze at court. Soon, plans for a Go tournament are afoot, and when Jinshi and Lahan get involved, it keeps getting bigger and bigger.

On the day of the tournament, the medical office is left with too many hands, since most people are at the festivities. When Maomao is summoned on an errand to the venue, she finds herself pressed into service there. Even knowing how popular Go has been lately, she's startled by the sheer number of attendees—and then Lahan lets her in on a particular rumor going around…

People claim that if you can beat Lakan at Go, he'll grant any one wish you ask of him. Maomao scoffs—who would believe such nonsense?—but at exactly that moment, a masked man appears at the tournament. He starts winning games, coming ever closer to a match with the strategist himself. How will their game play out? And what does the masked man want?

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Prologue

"Make sure you smile."

Her mother was always saying that to her. To be certain her father would be happy on those rare occasions when he visited. To ensure he would give her that coveted pat on the head.

Her mother was not her father's main wife. Her father was old enough that he could have passed for her grandfather; he had a son by another woman who was as old as her mother. More like an uncle than an older brother.

Perhaps her older brother didn't like having a sister so much younger than he was, for his own children were forever teasing her, pulling her hair and pelting her with mud pies—ordinary childish cruelty. They would repeat what the adults said about her. Always careful to travel in packs large enough that she couldn't fight back.

They jeered at her, called her a concubine's daughter. So she grinned back. The corners of her mouth turned up, just showing her teeth. Her brother's children, who had known only obsequious smiles, backed away. She'd only smiled. What did they see when they looked at her? Their reaction seemed so ridiculous that it made her smile bigger.

Just at that moment, her father appeared. How must she have looked to him, covered in mud?

He began smiling too. He ignored his grandchildren, dressed in their finery, and came over to his filthy daughter. He wiped the dirt from her face and patted her head.

"I'm going to make you first," he said.

She asked him what he was going to make her first in.

"First in the whole nation. I know you have what it takes."

The other children didn't have it. Only she did. Learning that she was special like this made her heart pound.

"Don't let the sparkle fade from your eyes. The one thing you must never do is lose hope. Smile. And never let it slip."

Smile? She could do that. So long as there was something the least bit amusing, it was easy. She didn't need her father to tell her that. She spent all her

time seeking out fun and pleasant things. Even after he sent her away. Away, to that den of iniquity full of women...

Chapter 1: The Go Book

The wind was getting colder every day. Maomao began to sleep under an extra blanket.

She wasn't sleeping at that moment, though. She was staring open-mouthed at a veritable mountain of books piled in the entryway of the dormitory and marked *To Maomao*.

"What are those? I mean, they're books, obviously," Yao said as she emerged from her room. She'd managed to recover from her episode of poisoning, thankfully. It had taken a while for her to get back into action, but she would be starting work again in a couple days.

She came and stood beside Maomao. Her lovely face was now marked with jaundice. Her liver and kidneys had been badly compromised by the poison; she would have to avoid alcohol and salt, probably for the rest of her life. And they'd have to find her food that would be good for her skin.

"They're all the *same* book," En'en observed. She could naturally be found whenever Yao appeared. She was holding a bag of ingredients for their dinner—she'd been furiously gathering medicines and foods that would alleviate Yao's jaundice. It saved Maomao the trouble. "It looks like it's about Go. It says it's by Kan Lakan."

This was the doing of the freak strategist. Associating with troublesome people could only bring you trouble, Maomao knew, but knowing it and staying out of trouble were different things.

"I told him we didn't want these sitting around here, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He gave me a letter for you too," said the middle-aged woman who ran the dormitory.

She gave Maomao the letter. It contained a great many fulsome and indirect expressions, all written in a lovely script, but translated into plain language it said, *I made a bunch of copies of this book about Go. You can have some too.* It was clear that he'd forced some subordinate to write it for him. The poor guy.

"What are we supposed to do with these?" Yao asked. The stack of books was tall enough for her to lean against. Books were valuable objects—just one could cost enough to pay for a month of meals. Yet here was a whole stack of

them. They were printed books, so somewhat cheaper than hand-copied manuscripts, but producing so many of them was still no mean feat. Maomao could picture the strategist's adopted son Lahan hyperventilating over the amount of money involved. Oh, well. Not her problem.

"We burn them," Maomao said flatly. But then she changed her mind. "No... That wouldn't be nice." It wasn't the books' fault that they had been written by this particular author.

She flipped through one of the books and found that it was surprisingly well done. It contained game records, diagrams of games of Go, accompanied by explanations of the salient features of the board situation. It would probably go over the heads of beginners, but it seemed like something experienced players might enjoy. There was even an illustration of calico cats playing Go together, but Maomao chose to ignore it.

En’en was peeking at the book with evident interest.

“Want a look?” Maomao said.

“Sure!”

Maomao passed her a copy and she started flipping through it, eyes sparkling. *Who knew she had interests besides Yao?* thought Maomao (who did pick unusual things to be impressed by).

“Does it look interesting?” she asked.

“Yes, it does! You can tell this is the work of our honored strategist—it’s very well done. The first half consists mainly of games that rely on a lot of joseki, while the second half shows off less-conventional play.”

Maomao’s “older sisters” had taught her the basics of Go and Shogi, but she still didn’t quite follow what En’en was saying. Instead she asked, “Want one?”

“If you’re offering, then sure. If you’re trying to sell it to me, I’d be willing to pay up to one silver piece. Not only is the material excellent, but the paper and print quality are both beautiful.”

“One silver piece?” Maomao looked at the mountain of books. She’d had no idea they were that valuable.

“Just one? You think she should let them go that cheap?” Yao said, looking over the construction of the books. Being from a rich background, her sense of what was “cheap” was a bit out of step with most people’s. One silver piece could easily pay for two weeks’ worth of meals.

“I grant she could probably get more,” En’en replied. “I was hoping for a friendly discount.”

Not collegial—friendly. *So we’re friends now?* If En’en considered Maomao a friend, then it would be rude not to treat her as a friend back. Therefore, En’en was a friend. Maomao felt she could trust En’en’s valuation of the book (if not the somewhat financially unmoored Yao’s). If she said the books were worth one silver, they probably were. It looked likely they were going to go into mass production, however, so maybe she should price them a little lower than that.

“You and Maomao are friends, En’en?” Yao stared at them fixedly. “What does that make me, then?”

“You are my precious and irreplaceable young mistress!” En’en said, thumping her chest and smiling broadly.

I don’t think that’s what she wanted to hear, Maomao thought. The “young mistress’s” expression immediately turned sour. She seated herself on a chair in the entryway and crossed her legs, sulking.

“Er?” En’en said, taken aback.

“You can just have the book, En’en. But if you know anyone who might like Go, would you spread the word?”

“You’re looking for Go players? Yes, I know a few. The physicians like to spend their days off playing Go.”

Ah, now *that* was useful info. Maomao felt a smile creep over her face as she regarded the books. *With a little money in my pocket, I could buy some valuable medicines.* A wide variety of items from the west had accompanied Shaoh’s shrine maiden to the capital. The most exotic of them would be snapped up by the city’s richest residents, but soon what remained would work its way to the markets. Even there, such imported goods would not come cheap—but, yes, that’s what money was for.

“Do you think you could tell me who those Go players are?” Maomao asked. En’en responded by pulling out a silver coin from her purse.

“Here,” she said. “Payment.”

“I said I would give it to you.”

“I’m happy to pay for it. But in exchange...” En’en glanced significantly at the pile of books. “Cut me in on the deal.” She gestured at the coin.

I knew she was a smart one. Maomao gave her a look indicating she understood. That was when they heard the thumping behind them. Yao was stamping her feet. Foot tapping was not the sort of thing that refined young ladies were supposed to do, but Yao was making a special effort.

“Y-Young mistress, don’t do that!” En’en said immediately, exactly the rise Yao had been looking for.

“En’en! Isn’t dinner ready yet?” She fixed the two of them with a scowl.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I’ll make something right away!” En’en said and hurried to the kitchen. Maomao looked at Yao, contemplating how adorable she was. She let her hand brush the books. She decided to put them in her room for now. It was going to be tight quarters for a while.

“Maomao,” Yao said.

“Yes?” Maomao looked back, a few books already in her hands.

“Are you free tomorrow?”

“I suppose, in a manner of speaking. But then, in a way, I also have work tomorrow.”

All three of them, Maomao, Yao, and En’en, had the next day off. Maomao could do what she wanted—poke her head in at the apothecary’s shop in the pleasure district or wander around town to see if anyone was stocking any interesting medicines.

“It’s got to be one or the other!” Yao said.

“Busy, then,” Maomao said.

“You’re free! I know you are!” Yao took Maomao by the shoulders and shook her. The young mistress could be so headstrong.

Maomao nodded. “Is there something you want to do tomorrow?”

In response, Yao’s hand went to her cheek, brushing a blotch of jaundice. “I’d like to go shopping for some medicine. I thought you’d know more about it than En’en.”

I get it. Yao was fifteen, an age when young women were worried about their appearance.

“Perhaps you’d like to shop for some makeup while we’re at it?” Maomao knew a place that served all the highest courtesans. When some good-for-nothing customer struck them, that was where they went. The shop knew how to hide even the nastiest bruises. Maomao was sure Yao would like to look her best when she came back to work.

“Makeup?” Yao looked closely at Maomao. She was studying the area around her nose. “Why do you draw freckles on your face, anyway?” They lived in the dorm together; Yao had long ago realized that Maomao’s freckles were fake.

“Oh, you know,” Maomao said. She’d resolved to stop once, but Jinshi had ordered her to keep doing it. Having to explain *why*, though, was tricky. It was risky to bring Jinshi into it. Finally she said, “Religious reasons.” It seemed like the best way to not have to go into details.

Yao, though, wouldn’t give up. “Does it, like, represent some apothecary god or something?”

“No. It’s a charm, if you will. To help me grow taller.”

“Huh. All right.” Yao didn’t need to get any taller, so such a charm was singularly unhelpful to her. Maomao was relieved to see her losing interest.

“Maomao...” It was at that moment that En’en entered carrying the evening’s side dish. She was giving Maomao a look that clearly said: *Please don’t lie to the young mistress.*

Chapter 2: A Jaunt Around Town

The next day, Maomao went shopping with Yao and En'en. Their little expedition took them to a commercial district along a main avenue south of the dorm. Shops lined the street, with open-air stalls filling the spaces between them. The place was bustling, busy and alive.

"What's that you've got, Maomao?" Yao asked, pointing to a cloth-wrapped package Maomao was carrying.

"Some of the books from yesterday," she replied. "I thought maybe I could sell a few copies to the bookstore." She'd brought just three, knowing that they wouldn't be interested in a large pile of copies of the same title.

"You're selling them?" En'en scrunched up her face.

"Just trying to get a sense of the market value."

"I see," she said, apparently satisfied.

Yao was peering at the sky. "I'm not sure I like the look of this weather," she said.

Maomao looked up: the sky was heavy with leaden clouds. "You're right. Strange for autumn. It can't be a typhoon at this time of year."

"It's a little chilly without the sun," said Yao, who had a scarf wrapped around her neck. It helped ward off the cold, yes, but Maomao suspected it was also to hide her jaundice. *I knew it must be bothering her.* She renewed her resolve to find Yao some good makeup.

"I'd like to start by picking these up," En'en said. She showed Maomao a list she'd written. It mostly consisted of fruits and vegetables. "Anything I'm missing?" she asked.

In response, Maomao looked at Yao. "You like white rice, do you, Yao?"

"Like it? I mean, I guess. Isn't it just basic food?"

"Let me put it this way: Do you prefer to actively avoid other kinds of rice?"

White rice was rice that had been polished. It tasted far better than unpolished rice, but the polishing process removed many of the nutrients that made rice worth eating. Maomao's old man had told her that eating unpolished rather than polished rice would help you avoid beriberi.

"Are you saying I *have* to eat unpolished rice?" Yao asked. The frown on her

face suggested how she really felt about it.

"Not necessarily, but you should consider mixing things into your white rice. Grains, barley, or maybe sesame seeds. Any of them would give you a broader variety of nutrients." If rice was going to be her staple food, it would be best if she could get a range of other nutrition with it.

"How about we toss in some buckwheat berries, then, mistress? I know you like those," En'en said, but Maomao made a big X with her hands. En'en looked worried. "No buckwheat?"

"I'm afraid not. Because *I* can't eat it." Buckwheat gave her hives.

The other two women stared at Maomao, unimpressed.

What am I supposed to say? En'en's meals are delicious. And she'd frequently made enough for three recently.

"P-Perhaps I might suggest seaweed?" Maomao said.

"Seaweed," En'en repeated. She didn't seem very enthusiastic.

"Certainly. And meat can be replaced with beans or fish. Not all of it, of course, just some."

Fatty foods were supposed to be bad for you. Yao was looking more despondent by the minute. People her age liked to eat lots; she would naturally be disappointed to hear she shouldn't have too much meat. She would also have to limit her intake of salt and alcohol. En'en was looking concerned too.

Hmm, Maomao thought. The saying went that you are what you eat: food was kissing cousins with medicine. But it still had to *taste* good. *I think I know what to do.*

Maomao had a favorite place for moments like this. "Come this way," she said.

"Why? What's over there?" Yao said.

Maomao led them off the main road, farther and farther down the back alleys, glancing back occasionally to make sure they were still following her. Soon there were as many houses as there were shops, and eventually they arrived at a restaurant with a soot-stained sign. It didn't exactly look like it specialized in haute cuisine. There were two tables crammed into the restaurant itself, with another poking outside. Instead of chairs, the tables were lined with upside-down barrels.

"Are you both feeling hungry?" Maomao asked.

"It's a little early for lunch," Yao said, but she looked intrigued. She couldn't help noticing, though, that the restaurant seemed deserted.

"A little early is best. It gets crowded at lunchtime," Maomao said. She

peered into the shop, warm steam drifting out. “Auntie? Are you open?”

“Sure enough,” came a voice from within. A woman who must have been something more than forty years of age shuffled up. “Hoh. The apothecary girl. Don’t usually see you at this hour.”

“We hoped to get a meal in before it got crowded.”

The woman was one of Maomao’s customers; she came all the way to the pleasure district to buy medicine. She’d been a regular ever since Maomao’s father had cured her of an illness she’d suffered from many years ago.

“Three portions, please. Whatever you have on hand. Ideally, something that’s not fried.”

“Coming right up. Don’t usually see you without your father either...” She looked at Yao and En’en and grinned.

“Less talk, more food. Please.” Maomao seated herself on one of the barrels.

“Maomao, why did you suddenly decide to take us out to eat?” En’en asked. She and Yao both looked mystified.

“Trust me. Sit down,” she urged them.

They sat. The woman soon brought their food, a pot full of congee and several side dishes. Maomao apportioned the side dishes among the three of them, passing a bowl each to Yao and En’en.

“All right, if you don’t mind...” Yao, ever the proper young lady, made a gesture of thanks and picked up her spoon. She didn’t look entirely sure about this; the restaurant wasn’t the cleanest place around.

“Is this potato congee?” En’en asked, sipping a spoonful of porridge. Sesame seeds floated in the congee, which included stewed potato. At the first mouthful, her eyes opened. “Is *this* potato congee?” The sweetness of it must have startled her.

“Yes—it’s sweet potato,” Maomao said. The very tubers that Lahan’s biological father was growing. They came from the south and were ordinarily a rare treat—but this woman’s restaurant was able to procure a supply through the Verdigris House.

“That’s absolutely amazing,” Yao said, going for another spoonful. Maomao grinned: she already knew that.

“You see? And sweet potato with sesame fits perfectly within your diet. You could probably get away with putting some barley or oats in there too.” The modicum of salt in the dish was perfect for flavor, although if it needed a little something extra, minced kelp might make a good addition.

“Try some of this too,” Maomao said, passing her some sticky stewed tofu.

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“It really is wonderful,” En’en said, almost regretfully. As a confident cook, perhaps it touched a nerve to eat something quite so delicious. “The flavor is so robust, but it never becomes overbearing.”

“That’s what ginger and garlic will do for you,” the middle-aged woman said. “And instead of seasoning, we use *xiandan*.” That is to say, a salt-cured egg added when seasonings ordinarily would be. “We get the viscosity with kudzu root. It warms the body—good for the type who catch a chill easily.” (Kudzu root was also used as a medicine.)

“How did you make this?” En’en asked, her eyes shining as she pointed to some grilled fish.

“Fragrant herbs and just a dab of butter for taste. I know you said nothing too fatty, but surely a dab won’t hurt.” She rubbed her sides as she spoke.

“Our hostess can’t eat rich foods because of an old illness,” Maomao explained to the other girls. “But she proves that you can still make wonderful meals without much fat or salt.”

“Gracious, Maomao, you’ll make me blush.” The woman was grinning again. “Here, cow’s milk. You can drink some of this if the smell of the condiments bothers you.”

“C-Cow’s milk?” Yao said. It was a regional thing; not everyone was used to it.

“I’ve warmed it up and added a bit of honey. It should go down easy. I’d like to put my best foot forward for *friends* of Maomao’s.” She was careful to emphasize the word.

“Gah. Yeah, fine. Don’t you have any other side dishes?” Maomao practically shoved the woman back into the restaurant, her tone clearly communicating that she wished the lady would butt out. People evidently regarded Maomao as someone who had no friends. When Maomao had told her “older sisters” at the Verdigris House about the girls her age she used to hang out with at the rear palace, they’d all looked shocked. Pairin had gone so far as to wipe the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief.

I can’t believe them. Really. Of course she had friends. Emphasis on *had*, maybe. She could think of at least two—but one of them she couldn’t see anymore, and the other...well, Maomao hoped she was doing all right for herself. *Where did Xiaolan end up working?* she wondered, recalling the talkative palace woman. Maomao knew she’d found work at a mansion somewhere in the capital, but that was all she knew. She’d received a few letters, written in Xiaolan’s unsteady hand, but none of them included the crucial detail of where she was

actually living. Maomao couldn't reply to her even if she wanted to.

She grabbed a bit of one of the side dishes, still mostly staring into space. Yao was digging into the congee with gusto, apparently quite taken with the taste. En'en was busy trying to deduce exactly how it had been seasoned.

"Would you like to go to the makeup place after our meal?" Maomao asked. En'en had suggested shopping for ingredients first, but then they would end up carrying the groceries all over. True, the best stuff might sell out if they didn't hurry up, but on the other hand, what was left would be marked down. Maomao considered that a fair trade.

"I'm surprised you know so much about makeup, Maomao," Yao said.

"My line of work has exposed me to a lot of different things," she replied. At the shop, she sometimes had to mix up concoctions of dye and white powder for customers who were self-conscious about a scar—experience that had come in very handy for disguising Jinshi.

"Is the makeup place close to here?" En'en asked. Now she was jotting down a recipe with a portable writing set.

"We'll have to walk a bit, but it's not far. And perhaps we could make a quick detour on the way back?" Maomao held up her bundle of Go books.

"Still have your heart set on selling those?" En'en sounded like she still couldn't quite believe it.

"Well, I certainly don't intend to just carry them around forever," Maomao said. Her mind was made up.

After the meal, the girls worked their way back to the main street. The most famous courtesans in the capital used white powder every bit as good as anything that could be found at a noble girl's dressing table, and the shop Maomao had in mind occupied a prime location in the commercial district.

"Skewers! Delicious skewers! Who wants one?" A man with a handful of chicken skewers was trying to draw in customers. The meat was cooked over a charcoal fire, dripping juices. The man didn't really have to bother hawking his wares—the smell was more than enough to keep the customers lining up. If she hadn't just had lunch, Maomao would have been with them.

"Is it just me, or does the marketplace feel a little different from last time?" Yao said. She looked around, perplexed. Their sheltered young mistress was really getting the hang of doing the shopping!

"As the seasons change, so do the shops. And you might be noticing all the imported stuff," Maomao said. There were colorful textiles, exotic accessories,

and—

"Fine grape wine, all the way from the west! You won't find it anywhere else! Have a taste, if you please!" A merchant was dispensing a red liquid from a barrel. Maomao started to shuffle over to him, but En'en caught her by the collar.

"Not even one drink?" she said, looking at En'en.

"Not when the young mistress can't have any. You'll survive."

"I really don't mind," Yao said. She couldn't have alcohol now, but since she hadn't been a drinker to begin with, it wasn't really an issue.

"Getting drunk is not the way to go shopping," En'en replied.

Maomao's shoulders slumped and they wandered back to the main street. Other customers, ones who hadn't had somebody grab them before they could try a tipple, were buying bottles almost as soon as they tasted the stuff. Maomao normally preferred good, dry alcohol, but something fruity wasn't so bad every once in a while.

Is it really imported? Maybe it wasn't from another country, just sort of from that general direction. Then again, the alcohol Maomao had tried in the western capital had been good stuff. She would have been happy to have another taste of it—but she would worry that the flavor might have changed during the long journey east. *Wonder if there might be time to buy some on the way home.*

They walked past the wine shop, but Maomao kept looking regretfully over her shoulder.

The makeup shop patronized by the Verdigris House was smaller than many of its competitors, but it was more than lovely enough to set the heart of a young woman aflutter. Paintings of beautiful women were posted out front, and rows of makeup products were visible within. Every woman who passed by stole a look at the place, clearly having an internal argument about whether to go inside. The owner never shouted, summoned, or cajoled. Elite establishments like hers didn't stoop to base hawking. Those who wanted what she had for sale would come to her without any prompting.

"All right, just so I know, what's your budget?" Maomao asked.

"We'll pay any price as long as we can get the best stuff!" En'en responded, clenching her fist for emphasis.

Don't think so. I know you can't afford that on your salary... Maomao presumed En'en was making the same amount she was, which would definitely put the finest makeup out of reach. Maybe she was getting a stipend from that

uncle of Yao's that she hated so much?

"Welcome, ladies," said the proprietress, a middle-aged woman who sounded as refined as she looked—which was quite refined indeed. Her makeup was perfect, as befitted someone who sold the stuff. Her skin was pale and her mouth was perfectly highlighted with rouge. A simple hair stick held her hair up, but closer inspection revealed it was lacquered. Her nails were likewise perfectly painted, complementing her skin tone. *I can see why the old hag would shop here,* Maomao thought. The ladies of the pleasure district always had to be on the cutting edge of style—as of course did the madam who managed them.

The proprietress continued to smile but didn't approach them. She would be there if they had any questions.

"How about we start with powder?" Yao said, standing in front of a shelf boasting an array of white powders, a whole range of them, organized by ingredient. They went from pure white to varieties that included some sort of dye or pigment to match a range of skin tones. Everything was neatly arranged—but one shelf had nothing on it.

"Excuse me, are these sold out?" En'en asked.

"Ah, those..." The proprietress walked over, an aroma of perfume wafting after her. She was a slightly built woman, and her pale skin made her seem almost like she might vanish at any moment. "The items that used to be on that shelf were prohibited when it was discovered that they contained a toxic ingredient. It's a shame; they always sold very well. They held to the skin quite nicely."

Hoo boy, do I remember that, Maomao thought. So the ban on the poisonous whitening powder hadn't stopped at the walls of the rear palace; it had evidently gone into effect all over the capital. That was laudable in its own way, but it had to be a blow to businesspeople like this woman.

"That's a lot to get rid of," En'en observed.

"Yes. We offer a wide enough range of products that we were able to absorb the loss, but some establishments are still offering the toxic powder, or so one hears."

Not hard to understand. The stuff coated the skin well, making the wearer look pale and beautiful. One of the main ingredients was quicksilver: it didn't go bad like plant-based cosmetics, and it could be mass-produced, making it easy to buy. There were plenty of courtesans who had continued to use it despite Luomen's warnings. There would always be fools who didn't listen, just like the ladies of Consort Lihua's Crystal Pavilion.

Well, maybe "fool" is being ungenerous. Some people might have something they valued more highly than their health or even their lives. As for those who sold the poisonous stuff, well, were they so different? Without money they couldn't eat, and if they couldn't eat, they would die. And some people wouldn't hesitate to shorten the lives of others in order to extend their own. Maybe the merchants dealing in the toxic powder had no other way to make a living. Not to say Maomao thought it had been the wrong choice to ban the substance, the very production of which could have deleterious effects on the body.

And then there's this stuff, she thought, picking up another powder. "Is this calomelas?" she asked. This was another white powder that her father had looked less than pleased about. It, too, contained mercury, which was also sometimes used as a treatment for syphilis.

"Indeed it is. Thankfully, it's helped make up much of the shortfall in sales," the proprietress said.

Calomelas should probably have been regulated too, but if you started saying "this is poison, and that's poison, and that's poison" and ordered everything off the market at once, it might actually inspire even wider circulation of the problematic products. They would have to pick their moment to implement new rules.

"Maomao, which do you think would be best?" En'en asked. She and Yao had picked out a selection of possibilities—wisely excluding anything that used calomelas.

"Rice flour and talc?" she said. Both appeared to have other ingredients as well, but they weren't described in detail. "May I try some?"

"Go ahead," the proprietress said, using a cotton bud to dab a little on Maomao's palm. Maomao checked the viscosity and the smell. Both okay. Quite good, in fact. She thought this powder might be almost on par with what Empress Gyokuyou used.

"What do you think?" En'en asked.

Maomao glanced at the proprietress. "Honest opinions, good or bad, help us improve our products and service," the woman said. So she didn't just sell decent products—she was a decent person. No wonder she could handle the madam in a business negotiation.

"I think both seem like excellent powders," Maomao said. "The particles are fine, and they hold to the skin well. I have a question about the rice flour powder."

"What's that, may I ask?"

“Rice flour can rot. And given the size of the container, I have to think that during the rainy season, it would start to go moldy before you got halfway through it. I assume there’s some additional ingredient added as a preservative, and it makes me somewhat uneasy not to know what it is.” Knowing that Yao would be using the powder, safety was foremost in Maomao’s mind. “Talc doesn’t go bad and isn’t toxic. I think this one would be the simplest to use.”

Talc had diuretic and anti-inflammatory properties, and was often used medicinally with bracket fungus. In all the times Maomao had used it, she’d never known it to cause any undesirable side effects. *That doesn’t mean it doesn’t have any, but I won’t know until I encounter them,* she thought. Vigilance would be her watchword until she was sure.

“You’ll take the talc, then?” the proprietress said.

“No, ma’am. I think they both have an admixture. I’m concerned—if it’s anything that’s bad for you, it would defeat the point.”

The proprietress frowned subtly at what might have sounded to her like nitpicking. En’en, meanwhile, was thinking the matter over; Yao, evidently having decided to leave things in En’en’s hands, was eyeing some eyebrow pencils made out of spiral shells.

“In that case, perhaps some of this,” the proprietress said, going into the back of the store and emerging with a ceramic container. It was about half the size of the one on display. “Our rice powder is made exclusively with plant materials. Why, you could eat it if you wanted. Would a size like this be more in line with the amount you’d be using? Or if you’d prefer to bring your own container, I would be happy to fill it for you. With, of course, a discount for bringing your own holder.”

This lady knows how to make a sale, Maomao thought. She was trying to cultivate repeat customers by addressing their needs directly.

“Would you specifically recommend this powder?” Maomao asked.

“Certainly. I use it myself. It sticks beautifully. Very easy to use.” A look at the woman’s skin showed that it was, indeed, excellent stuff. Yet still something nagged at Maomao.

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Yao wandered back up and said, “Why not just go with the rice flour powder, En’en?”

“It’s not a bad idea,” En’en said. “I could try to make some myself, but I don’t think I could ever get it so fine.” She’d apparently considered making her own powder to ensure it was safe, but there was no substitute for a specialist. And Maomao assumed the proprietress wouldn’t be generous enough to reveal the secrets of how she made her wares.

“In that case, we’ll take—” Maomao was interrupted by a young woman who emerged from the back of the store.

“Mother!” she said.

“I’m with a customer,” the proprietress replied. A frown crossed her face. Nonetheless, her daughter, with a quick, polite bow to Maomao and the others, began to whisper into her ear. Whatever was going on, it seemed to be urgent. As her daughter talked, the woman’s expression changed. Finally she said to Maomao, “I’m terribly sorry. I’ll be right back. If you’ll excuse me.” Then she left her daughter to take care of things and went to the back.

Some kind of trouble? Maomao wondered. She was curious, but it wasn’t her place to stick her nose into whatever was going on. The woman’s daughter wrapped up their purchase and did the bill. En’en took the change, which had white smears on it.

“Oh, pardon me,” the young woman said, taking back the whitened coins. Maomao saw that her fingertips were white, and the fresh change she pulled out to give them was quickly smudged as well. Even their package had a white smear on it. “Oh, no! I’m so terribly sorry!”

“It’s all right,” Yao told her.

“Were you checking the merchandise?” Maomao asked with a glance at the young woman’s fingers. Three of the fingers on her right hand were whitened, as if she had been taking fingerfuls of powder to check the feel.

“I’m impressed you noticed,” she said.

“Let me guess: you discovered something unusual about the powder and felt it was worth mentioning right away.” The young woman didn’t respond to that, but her face made it clear that Maomao had guessed right.

“Was there something in the powder there shouldn’t have been?” En’en pressed. They’d picked the best stuff they could find, but if there were impurities in it, then what was the point? “What is it?” she said, leaning closer to the young woman.

“En’en,” Yao said, holding her back.

The young woman was on the verge of tears. “I... I’m so sorry. We got a new dealer recently. He insists he’s brought us exactly what we ordered, but it just doesn’t feel right to the touch. When I asked him if he was sure he hadn’t added any other ingredients, he snapped at me to stop trying to talk my way out of our deal. I was scared, so I came to let my mother know...”

An unsavory merchant? Or an honest misunderstanding? Maomao wondered. The dealer certainly sounded shady, but she’d only heard the young woman’s side of the story. The proprietress still hadn’t returned. Whatever they were talking about back there, it was taking a long time.

“My mother doesn’t want to sell a product if she doesn’t know what’s in it. The powder that was brought in today uses the same formula we always use, so we should be able to tell whether anything is wrong by touch. But the man who brought it today says we don’t have any proof of our accusations and refuses to leave.”

Hmm. Maomao crossed her arms. En’en was obviously deeply concerned about whether there was anything mixed into the white powder, and Yao—bless her earnest heart—looked ready to give someone a piece of her mind. Maomao suspected the exact feel of rice flour could change depending on how and when it was used, but it looked like there were some unanswered questions here. *Well, can’t go home now.*

“If you’ll pardon me,” she said, opening the door to the back room. She found the proprietress and the dealer locked in a staring contest. Between them sat a large jar.

“I told you! I followed the formula exactly as you gave it to me! Tell me what you think I got wrong!” The merchant, a man not quite in middle age, was shouting so loud that spittle flew from his mouth, which was open wide enough for Maomao to see that several of his front teeth were missing.

The proprietress didn’t back down. “Oh, I know what you got wrong. There’s something *in* this. You added something. It doesn’t feel like it should.”

“You won’t shut up about the *feel*, but that has nothing to do with anything! The feel of rice flour changes with the humidity, and you know it!”

They were talking past each other. Nothing was going to get resolved at this rate. “Excuse me. It looks like this discussion isn’t going anywhere,” Maomao said.

“Oh! I’m afraid you really shouldn’t be back here, miss,” the proprietress said when she noticed Maomao, giving her a look of reproof. Her tone remained deferential, but her eyes were grim.

“I’m sorry, my dear, but as you can see, we’re in the middle of a business negotiation. Maybe you’d be so good as to wait outside until we’re finished,” the merchant added, likewise polite but implacable.

Maomao ignored both of them, peering into the jar. It was filled to the brim with white powder. There was a spoon inside, so she scooped up some of the merchandise.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” the merchant cried.

Maomao put a finger in the powder. “It’s rice flour, all right. Would this be the same stuff my companions and I were about to purchase?”

“No, not quite,” the proprietress said. “The price of rice flour shot up recently, you see... We asked another dealer to produce something with the same formula...” She didn’t quite seem to want to finish any of her sentences.

An increase in the price of rice flour? It was the season when new rice was usually readily available—had the harvest been worse than usual?

She could tell from the feel that this was, in fact, rice powder. It was smooth, and about the same color as the stuff they were on the verge of purchasing. She agreed too, though, that it felt somewhat different under her fingers than the powder she’d been handling earlier.

“You can tell, can’t you, miss? Tell her my product is unadulterated! This stubborn mule is just trying to get me to lower my price!”

“A mule! I take pride in being able to offer my customers only the safest products! Every detail matters when it’s going to go on someone’s skin.”

Maomao could see both their perspectives. The merchant was right that the consistency and texture of rice flour could change with the weather—which wasn’t very good today. It could simply be more humid than usual.

“I’m afraid I can’t purchase this if we don’t know for certain which of you is telling the truth,” En’en interjected. She took a hard line when it came to products that Yao was going to use.

“Shall we do a little test, then?” Maomao said.

“Test?” the others asked in unison.

“You told us this rice flour is made entirely of plant components, all safe for human consumption. In which case...” She was going to try to eat it.

“You’re going to eat it? The powder?” the merchant asked.

“It’ll give you an upset stomach if you simply eat it dry. Perhaps if we dissolved it in water and made a *baobing* flatbread out of it?” the proprietress suggested.

“H-Hold on! You think you’ll actually be able to tell?” Yao said.

“I’m very confident in my tongue,” Maomao replied. She hadn’t done all that food tasting for nothing. She turned to the proprietress and the merchant. “Just to be sure—there’s no buckwheat in this, is there?”

“Corn, yes, but no kind of wheat,” the merchant said.

No problem, then. The corn would explain the powder’s slight yellow tint. “I’ll need a bowl and some water, and also a pot and a flame.”

“Ah... Our house is right behind the store. You can use the stove there,” the proprietress’s daughter said. She was probably concerned about the possibility of an explosion if they lit a fire in a space full of white powder.

“Very well. Finally, do you have any leafy vegetables and some chicken?”

“Focus. Please,” En’en said, giving Maomao a rap on the back of the head. She’d just wanted to make the powder as tasty as possible. Maomao picked up the jar and headed for the main house.

The finished flatbread was tasty (although not as tasty as it would have been with some greens and meat). “In a perfect world, I think a *little* more corn might have been nice. And some white-hair scallion and lamb’s meat to round it off.”

“Maomao, we’re supposed to be talking about the powder.” En’en had cut up the bread and was conducting a visual inspection. She appeared to be thinking that flatbread might make a nice dinner. “Maomao says it’s okay, young mistress, so I don’t think the white powder should be any problem as such.”

“Uh... I think everyone is getting pretty impatient,” Yao said, concerned.

“You see? It’s just like I told you. You keep insisting I must have added something, but I followed your formula exactly. There’s nothing *wrong* with my product!” The merchant slammed a wooden writing scroll containing the list of ingredients on the table.

The proprietress and her daughter both looked like they wanted to offer a rebuttal, but there was nothing they could say. They still weren’t prepared to accept they’d been wrong.

“Would you like some? It doesn’t taste unpleasant,” Maomao said.

“But...” the proprietress started.

“But it felt different to you, didn’t it?” Maomao took the woman’s hand. Her fingers were caked with white powder; it was even on the red of her nails. “Perhaps you could think of it another way, then.”

“What do you mean?”

Maomao wiped the pad of one finger across one of the woman’s fingernails, leaving a white streak. She’d been wondering about the woman’s nails. “What if

it was your previous supplier who'd been adulterating his product all this time?"

The woman went almost as pale as her product.

When a person came into contact with a poison, such as arsenic or lead, it often showed in their fingernails. "You said yourself that some *other* stores continue to sell the prohibited whitening powder. There could easily be merchants who continued to supply it without saying anything. Suppose, for example, that they had white powder of questionable quality, and added something to it as a stabilizer."

The symptoms of the poison would be minimized by the quantity of other stuff in the mixture. But someone who used the powder every day, like the proprietress did, would show the signs.

"Have you had any loss of appetite? Poor digestion? Trembling of the fingers?" Maomao asked. She wondered how the woman's skin tone looked beneath that makeup. The woman's expression was enough to answer her questions.

"So you're saying this—" En'en looked at the jar of powder they'd bought. Maomao took it and opened the lid.

"Shall we try another flatbread? With *this* powder?"

She was most interested to see the results.

It was dark outside when they left the shop. The heavy clouds had opened up, and the ground was soaked. "Shoot! We're going to get all wet," Yao said.

"I thought this might happen," said En'en, pulling out some umbrellas Maomao hadn't even known she had.

"You brought umbrellas?" she asked.

En'en tapped the sign of the store they'd just left. "It looked like it might rain, so I asked the shopkeeper's daughter to go buy some for us. Not too much to ask for our trouble, I'd say, right?"

"When did you... I mean... *Too much to ask*?"

True, the shop had sold them a harmful product, whether intentionally or not. When they'd dissolved their powder in water and baked with it, the results had been undeniably different from the first time around.

"I think you already asked quite a lot," Yao said. En'en was carrying some of the new, safe powder, and the proprietress had thrown in some perfume that was supposed to be good for your skin. The aromatic oil was safe to eat but didn't hold to the skin very well, so it could be combined with the powder to form a liquid makeup.

“Not at all,” En’en replied. “I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if my mistress got sick.”

“I think you should be talking to Maomao. Tell her not to put awful stuff in her mouth.” Yao was looking at Maomao as if she still couldn’t believe what had happened. Maomao had made every effort to eat the flatbread with the poisonous powder, but Yao had pinned her arms to stop her.

“I would have spit it out right away. It would have been fine. I just wanted to see how it tasted.”

“I don’t understand what you see in these things,” Yao sighed.

“Let’s finish our shopping before the rain really starts coming down, mistress. We’ve eaten up a lot of time.” En’en opened an umbrella and ushered Yao under it with her. Then she held out another to Maomao. It was En’en, of course, who had requested *only* two umbrellas. After all, two people could fit under one umbrella...if they squeezed.

En’en said, “If anyone is still selling ingredients at this hour, I’m sure they’d be near the bell tower. I think the market should still be open there.”

The bell tower was at the center of the capital and rang the hours. It was a well-trodden area, so the shops there stayed open until late.

“We should be hearing the evening bell any minute n—” Maomao said, but she was interrupted by a searing flash of light accompanied by the booming of the bell.

“Yikes! Wh-What was that?” Yao said, looking around in astonishment. At the same moment, an earsplitting noise followed hard upon the ringing of the bell. Yao almost jumped out of her skin and clung to En’en. Her mouth was working open and shut, but no sound came out. En’en gave Yao a protective (and none too unhappy) hug.

“Thunder,” Maomao said. “That was a big one.”

“Are you all right, milady?” En’en said.

“Y-Yeah! I’m fine!” Yao said, although her face was awfully pale.

“A thunderclap that loud means it’ll start pouring soon. Shall we hurry and finish our shopping?” En’en said.

“Y-Yeah, let’s,” Yao said. She was trying to look unintimidated, but kept stealing little glances at the sky. En’en looked at her fondly and kept close. No doubt she was concerned for Yao, but also tickled by her display of fear. She was a twisted one. But Maomao already knew that.

Looks like I won’t be selling these today, Maomao thought, looking at the Go books in their cloth wrapping. Then she trotted off after the others.

Chapter 3: Trends

Jinshi's office looked much the same as it always did: mountains of paperwork, bureaucrats waiting their turn to speak with him, and the occasional court lady appearing from nowhere trying to get a look at him. It was bustling, no doubt, but it was substantially calmer than it had been not long ago.

His usual workload, which already kept him busy, had doubled since the shrine maiden from Shaoh had come to Li. He'd arranged a banquet in her honor, during which she had been poisoned, and Jinshi had spent many a sleepless night pursuing the case. Ultimately, it turned out to be all the shrine maiden's own doing, a whole act, but that was no small problem in itself. It was enough to leave him with his head in his hands.

The shrine maiden had survived the entire affair and was now living with the former consort Ah-Duo. Jinshi felt a bit bad about the way her home was turning into something of a safe house. The shrine maiden had left him with troubles of his own, though: he, along with a small number of others, had had to deal with the fallout of her "death." A number of officials were convinced that Shaoh would use the shrine maiden as a pretext to attack Li, but no such offensive materialized. Shaoh was principally a commercial and trading power; they couldn't start a war without substantial backing from someone else. If anything, the leaders of Shaoh were probably breathing a sigh of relief to be rid of the shrine maiden, who had been something of a thorn in their side.

Shaoh *had* made some demands over the incident, but they were nothing that Li hadn't anticipated. They wanted import duties reduced, particularly on foodstuffs. No one had expected them to come right out and say they didn't have enough food. The shrine maiden knew Shaoh's king and bureaucrats very well—their personalities and sense of political judgment. Nothing they did or asked for was unexpected. In fact, Jinshi was almost set back on his heels by the extent to which everything had followed the script. Which wasn't to say international issues were simple. So it was that until a few days before, he had been so busy that the amount of work now felt like a relief.

"This is for you, Master Jinshi," Basen said, putting another paper atop the towering pile. And to think—this was after Jinshi had delegated more than half

the work.

"I don't suppose we could delegate half of what's left," he said.

"I don't suppose, sir..."

The paper bore the personal chops of a number of high officials, and the civil servant on whom Jinshi had foisted the work couldn't ignore something with so many important seals on it. Such petitions inevitably ended up on Jinshi's desk, even if they concerned trivial matters. He sighed and pressed his chop to the paper.

Amid the bustle, one of the bureaucrats handling some of Jinshi's work stood up, looking restlessly in his direction. It was the same man who'd been with Jinshi when someone had attempted to poison his tea. He'd entered Jinshi's service to help until Basen was fully recovered, but he'd proven capable enough that Jinshi had asked him to remain. The man seemed eager to get back to his ordinary place of work, but the eternally understaffed Jinshi was loath to let him go.

"What's the matter?" asked Basen.

The man flinched. "N-Nothing..."

He seemed awfully anxious for someone who thought nothing was wrong. Now that Jinshi thought about it, he realized the man had been acting a little funny for a few days. Curious now, Jinshi narrowed his eyes.

"Is it really nothing? I want the truth." This interrogation came not from Jinshi, but from Basen, who had cornered the man. Strange things, dangerous things, had been happening around Jinshi of late, and Basen—who was responsible for Jinshi's safety—was on edge. If he waited to act until *after* something happened, it would be too late.

"H-Heek!" The bureaucrat's face was taut with fear. He reached into the folds of his robe with a shaking hand, whereupon Basen was on him, pinning him down. He could be merciless when he thought someone was hiding something.

"Who put you up to this?" he demanded, grabbing the man's wrist. Clutched in his hand was a scrap of paper.

"Let him go, Basen," Jinshi said, relieving the man of the paper. He looked at it—and let out a sigh. "Is *this* what was making you so nervous?"

"Huh?" Basen looked puzzled—indeed, downright flummoxed.

"Ow, ow, ow! Please let me go," the bureaucrat said.

Basen obliged, instead looking at what Jinshi had in his hand. "What's this?"

"I don't know when he had time to make such a thing, but it's quite thorough,

isn’t it?” Jinshi said. The paper announced that someone would be putting out a book. The date given was that very day, when, so the paper proclaimed, the book would be available at bookstores all over the capital.

“I... I really wanted one. Once a book sells out, you never know if you’ll be able to get a copy,” said the bureaucrat, rubbing his arm. He looked on the verge of tears. Judging by the look on his face, Basen at least had the good grace to feel guilty.

Books were luxury items—except for the most popular titles, second runs were uncommon. If a book sold out before you could get a copy, all you could do was wait for it to appear on the used market.

“If they’ve gone to all the trouble of distributing an announcement, don’t you think they probably plan to have a lot of stock ready?” Jinshi said. Printing in and of itself implied they were planning to make a lot of copies. You had to, to recoup the costs.

“I-I couldn’t say, sir. I expect it to be very popular...”

“Is the author so beloved?” Jinshi asked, looking the paper over as carefully as he could. Printing and distributing announcements like this to anyone and everyone—that was a new idea. He couldn’t help but be impressed. Whoever could have thought of it? Then he saw the name—and almost choked. He immediately wished he could unsee it.

Basen was giving him a puzzled look. “Grand Commandant Kan, sir?”

When Jinshi saw the title of the book, he understood. Kan was a reasonably common name. But Grand Commandant—that was a title, and only one person in the country held it. Kan Lakan, otherwise known as the freak strategist.

“Would you mind telling me who gave this to you?” Jinshi asked.

“A f-friend of mine at the Board of Revenue. An acquaintance of the Grand Commandant’s son. He was asked to give them to everyone he knew.”

The Board of Revenue was the department charged with overseeing financial matters—and the friend of a friend was Lahan. If he had a hand in this, then the book would be more than a passing fancy on the part of the strategist. It would be done well.

“So he’s written a Go book,” Jinshi mused. He had, he recalled, heard that the strategist had been going around telling people he was going to write such a book. Jinshi simply hadn’t imagined the project taking place on such a scale.

As far as it went, he appreciated the help in making books more universal. He himself had been trying to promote paper and printing projects. He was surprised, though, to discover that even this unassuming and dedicated

bureaucrat lusted after a copy of the strategist's book.

"I never realized the honored strategist had the gift of *belles lettres*," he said.

"Who cares whether his *lettres* are *belles*?!" the bureaucrat said, going from grumbling to garrulous in the blink of an eye. "It's almost impossible to understand what he's talking about, anyway. But they say the book will contain records of Grand Commandant Kan's games! No one would want to miss that!"

Jinshi thought he'd caught a rather uncomplimentary reference to Lakan in there. But in any case, some people really got fired up over their personal interests, and in this man's case, that interest appeared to be Go.

"I only have a passing acquaintance with Go. Is Grand Commandant Kan that good at it?" Basen asked, more perplexed than ever.

"That good?! Why, the only person in the country today who stands any chance of beating the Grand Commandant is His Majesty's own Go tutor!" The Emperor's tutor held the rank of Go "sage"—meaning he was the best player in the nation. Jinshi himself had had a few lessons from the man. How many stones' handicap had he had the last time they'd played together? He couldn't remember.

"Grand Commandant Kan is known for the elusiveness of his play. You never know what he's going to do next, how he'll come at you. A chance to study and understand his records is a mouthwatering prospect for any connoisseur of the game." The bureaucrat clenched his fist emphatically. His eyes were shining now. His delight in the subject seemed to have overwhelmed his resentment toward Basen over the manhandling.

"Yet even the Grand Commandant is only human. Surely no one is truly unbeatable?" Basen said. Another not particularly polite way of talking about the strategist—but also true. Jinshi had to agree with him.

"How can you say that?" the bureaucrat said. "Yes, the Imperial tutor is victorious over the Grand Commandant in six out of ten games—but the tutor is a professional player! The Grand Commandant has a *real* job he must attend to!"

Jinshi didn't say anything.

"To say nothing of the fact that no one at all can beat him at Shogi."

Basen didn't say anything.

Jinshi realized he really was very bad at handling people. "Very well. Basen, do you have your purse with you?"

"Er, yes, sir." Basen produced his wallet from the folds of his robes. Jinshi handed it to the bureaucrat, who looked from him to Basen and back, suddenly nervous again.

“It’s not much, but take it. A modest recompense for the discomfort Basen caused you,” Jinshi said.

“S-Sir, I couldn’t... It’s not even his...”

It was, sadly and indeed, not Basen’s purse. The young man simply held on to Jinshi’s money in case there was a need to purchase anything. Jinshi knew little about market prices, but he figured this would be enough to compensate the man for his troubles.

“I’m sure your hand must be hurt. You should leave work for the day. Go to one of those bookstores. I assume that purse will cover the cost of a book.”

“A-And then some, sir! I can’t accept this,” said the bureaucrat, who was proving too honest for his own good. He should have just taken the money, Jinshi thought. Very well. He would try a different approach.

“What are you talking about? I don’t mean just one book! Make sure you get one for me as well. And if there’s money left over, then one for Basen too. What are you waiting for? Go! Go, before they’re sold out! Or are you hoping for some hush money?”

“Not—Not at all, sir! I’m going!” The bureaucrat hurriedly showed himself out of the office.

Jinshi listened to his footsteps fade, then let out a sigh. “Basen. It’s not polite to pinion somebody with no warning.”

“Y-Yes, sir. But he could’ve...” Basen at least sounded apologetic.

“In any case, what’s done is done. You didn’t break his arm. You’ve learned at least that much control.” Jinshi knew that with Basen’s preternatural strength, that bureaucrat’s arm could easily have been pulverized. Jinshi would give Basen this much: he was growing up a bit.

“Master Jinshi, if you’ll forgive my saying so, I don’t have any interest in Go.” He seemed to be referring to Jinshi’s instructions to the official to bring a copy of the book for Basen.

“Interested or not, it can’t hurt you to learn. Even the most sheltered young lady at least learns to play Go. Suppose you meet a prospective marriage partner but find you have nothing to talk about—you can at least play a game together. Who knows where it might lead?” He was trying to be lighthearted, but Basen went beet red.

“I-I’m sure... I’d never... N-No such young lady and I would ever...” Basen fell silent before he ever succeeded at getting out a complete sentence. Jinshi gave him a curious look. When he sat back down at his desk, he felt a pang of remorse: the mountain of paperwork was still there, but now his helpful

bureaucrat was gone.

Within a few days, every palace, pavilion, and hall of the court resounded with the *click, click* of stones on boards. On the way to his office, Jinshi noted that even the soldiers in the guardhouse were playing Go.

"It's become quite the trend," Basen observed.

"Indeed," said Jinshi.

Needless to say, it was the freak strategist's book that had started this craze. Jinshi himself was carrying no fewer than six copies of it. Why so many more than the single copy he'd requested from the bureaucrat? They'd arrived for him accompanied by a short note: *Someone gave these to me. Help yourself.*

They'd come from the apothecary, Maomao. He assumed, much to his sorrow, that she hadn't sent them out of affection for him. More than likely, she was just trying to get rid of stock. He knew her; she would never go out of her way to buy a book by the strategist. They must have been sent to her in copious quantity. He sometimes wished he could ask her if she really understood the meaning of what he'd said during their last encounter.

Maomao was the strategist's daughter, and although she herself seemed intent on disavowing Lakan, from Jinshi's perspective the family resemblance was obvious. In any case, she certainly wouldn't want to be stuck with a gift from the father she so detested.

Jinshi didn't feel the money he'd given the official had been wasted, but still, he wasn't quite sure what he was going to do with six copies of the same book. Basen already had a copy. Maybe he would try giving them to Gaoshun, Ah-Duo, and the Emperor. The apothecary's thinking might have been similar to his—or not. He knew her to be strong-willed and careful, so it might be best to assume she had some sort of ulterior motive.

Jinshi had started by thinking about Maomao's books, but soon he found himself thinking about Maomao—specifically, how he might talk her into accepting his proposal. He would have to prepare, set everything up so that she had no comeback and no reason to refuse. He wanted to be a man who did what he said he would.

Still lost in thought—and under scrutiny from court ladies who watched him from afar—Jinshi arrived at his office. An official standing outside came over looking frantic when he spotted him. It was Basen, however, who asked, "What is it?"

"Pardon me, sirs. But if you would look at this..." The official handed Basen

a letter. He opened it and read it. His eyebrows twitched. Jinshi looked at the missive, but remained expressionless as he entered his office.

"Send a damage assessment immediately," he instructed.

"Sir!" the official said, and went out again. Jinshi trusted that a messenger would be sent if there was anything new to report.

Finally, he sighed. "So it's come."

The paper had read simply: *There has been a plague of locusts.*

There had been reports of small-scale insect swarms, but while Jinshi had seen the memos, the matters hadn't been substantial enough to warrant his personal involvement, and he'd been obliged to let his subordinates handle them. None of the other outbreaks had been too large, but this...

"So we're going to lose thirty percent of the harvest," Jinshi reflected. That was a major blow. He pricked up his ears when he heard that the location of the outbreak was to the west, a major grain-producing area. "Isn't it a bit late for the wheat harvest?" he asked.

"It's not the wheat that's been hit—it's the rice," answered Sei, Jinshi's Go-loving bureaucrat. Other than his timid streak, the man was proving quite capable. "For about twenty years now, they've been experimenting with growing rice in the area using large-scale irrigation. From one perspective, this could be considered fortunate. Only the areas with unharvested rice were affected. We were lucky this didn't overlap with the wheat harvest."

"They're drawing water from the Great River?" Twenty years ago would have been just about the time Jinshi had been born. He did recall hearing something about a major flood control project that had taken place around then. They must have built something to divert the water at the same time.

"Yes, sir. It was purely a local endeavor, something they tried out in a couple of places. The rice harvest is more reliable than wheat, but if they made the scale too grand it would impact everything downstream. As such, the project never got any larger than it already is."

Twenty years back—that would have been the time of the empress regnant. She'd been a woman among women, not afraid to experiment with even the most outlandish policies. Sei drew a large circle on a map. Jinshi observed that while it wasn't too close to the capital, it wasn't so far away either. Four or five days' round trip, perhaps.

The paperwork still formed a mountain on his desk. He looked first at Basen, who had stayed silent throughout the conversation, and then at the obviously

nervous Sei. The last thing he wanted was to make more work for himself or either of them. But he just couldn't leave something alone when it had his attention like this. He stifled a groan.

"I-If I may?" Sei raised a hand hesitantly.

"Yes?" said Jinshi, trying his best to maintain a neutral expression.

"I w-wouldn't wish to be impertinent, Moon Prince, but is it possible y-you've taken on a bit too much work?"

"It *is* possible, and I'm well aware of it. But what exactly am I supposed to do about it? These matters can hardly be left to anyone else."

Sei blanched slightly. "I hardly d-dare to say this, sir, b-b-but..." His eyes seemed to look everywhere except Jinshi's face. "*Other* honorable personages have been known to entrust their subordinates with—"

"What injustice do you speak of?!" Basen demanded, slamming his fist down on the table. Sei yelped and cowered. "Who would have the audacity to do such a thing? Speak up! You must know something!"

Basen closed in on Sei, but Jinshi held him back. "Basen. You're scaring him. I would, however, be interested in the answer to his question. Who *is* doing such things?"

"Er... Er... Grand Commandant Kan, sir." It would certainly be plausible for the "honored strategist" to engage in such behavior, but the look on Sei's face said he was hiding something.

Jinshin leaned in. "May I assume he's not the only one?" Sei's cheeks flushed. Jinshi had been under the impression that he'd managed to avoid picking any personnel with *those* tendencies, but it looked like he was going to have to rethink putting his face too close to Sei's. Jinshi brushed the scar on his cheek.

"A-Also...His Majesty the Emperor..."

Jinshi and Basen were both struck dumb.

"I-Is that good enough?" Sei said, looking studiously at the ground, obviously desperate for them both to leave him alone.

Basen wasn't finished, though. "Who in the world could fill in for His Majesty himself?" He pressed toward Sei again, his breath hot in his nostrils.

"M-Master Gaoshun! He does it!"

Again the other two men had no recourse but silence.

"Of course, His Majesty puts his own seal on the documents when they're ready. I j-just thought if you could have an intermediary, someone to clean and organize things, they might cut down the number of memorandums that actually

reached you, Moon Prince, by two-thirds. If they were given the proper job title, surely they could exercise some personal discretion...”

Jinshi’s heart skipped a beat at the suggestion that he might have only a third as much work to do. Such important tasks, however, couldn’t be entrusted to some random bureaucrat—someone he might not even know.

Jinshi looked at Basen. He briefly entertained the idea that if Gaoshun could do such a job, then his son might be able to do it as well, but unfortunately, Basen wasn’t really cut out for desk duty. He was a diligent worker, but knowing his stern-mindedness and inflexibility, Jinshi suspected the jobs would simply back up. Was it being greedy, he wondered, to wish for someone with both the loyalty and family background to handle his work, who was also capable and judicious?

“Master Jinshi,” Basen said.

“Yes?”

“I do know someone particularly gifted at this kind of work...”

Jinshi’s eyes widened. “Do you? I hadn’t realized you had any acquaintances among the civil officials.”

“Just one, sir. Someone who passed the civil service exam last year, but presently languishes without an appointment.”

Jinshi realized he had an idea who Basen was referring to. “You don’t mean...”

“Yes, sir. Baryou. Perhaps you would know him better as Elder Brother Ryou.”

As his name implied, he, too, was a member of the Ma clan—Basen’s older brother.

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Chapter 4: The Ma Siblings

Baryou: Gaoshun's son, Basen's older brother.

The Ma clan produced many members of a military persuasion, but Baryou's talents ran more toward the literary and bureaucratic. As the eldest son, it was actually he and not Basen who should have been Jinshi's attendant, but Gaoshun knew his offspring too well to do that to him. Instead of forcing him to practice swordsmanship, he gave him a book. Baryou had all the physical prowess of a limp bean sprout, but he took to academic studies like a fish to water.

Then, last year, he had taken the civil service examination, which was held only once every four years—and he had passed on his first attempt. Even the most jaded eye could see that Baryou had all the makings of a superb civil servant. Yet he was unable to get a job. Why? A quick look at his current situation explained much.

"Impressive. As I knew he would be," Jinshi said. The papers that had been forming mountains on his desk had been reduced in height enough that you could see the other side. He let out a sigh of relief, and looked at where a man was working away silently in a corner of the room. His corner couldn't be seen from the entrance, and anyway he'd placed a partitioning screen between himself and the room, so visitors wouldn't know there was anyone there. Quite frankly, the man might have preferred to build four solid walls around himself, but Basen had discouraged that idea. And who was it behind this screen doing all that work?

"Master Jinshi..." said a man bearing an armload of paperwork. He was very slim, of average height, and his skin was so pale it bordered on sickly. He didn't exactly look healthy, but it was oddly amusing to see how his face—and only his face—looked so much like Basen, the picture of physical fitness, who was standing beside him. This man was perhaps a good *sun* shorter than Basen, and the way he stooped made him look shorter still. If Basen hadn't had such a baby face, it would have been hard to tell which of them was the older brother and which the younger.

But the stooped, feeble-looking man was indeed the older brother, albeit only by a year. Gaoshun's other son, Baryou.

The Ma clan, as we've remarked, traditionally produced soldiers. The bodyguards of the Imperial family were typically Ma people, as Gaoshun was for the Emperor and Basen was for Jinshi. By right, it should have been Baryou who acted as Jinshi's attendant. He was Gaoshun's second child and oldest son. But this scrawny sprout of a man wasn't made for guard work. Baryou was given the "Ba" name—the same character as Ma, reflecting the clan—but so was Basen, who was born the next year.

"Quick work. You're finished already?" Jinshi said.

"I am, sir. With you a statue, the work is done."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

Baryou's explanation seemed to be elliptical at best, a jump somewhere in the train of thought, and Jinshi didn't understand what he meant. Thankfully, another person appeared at that moment—a tall and beautiful woman with a hard look in her eyes. For a moment even Jinshi wasn't sure where she'd come from. Baryou could be seen wincing at her appearance.

"What Baryou is saying is this," she said. "'As you are as beautiful as a sculpted statue, Master Jinshi, one can hardly think of you as a human being. Thus even I, who find myself uncomfortable around human beings, can think of you as some creature by no means human, and therefore focus on my work.'"

Jinshi was quiet for a moment, unsure how to take that. He was quite casually being treated as inhuman. Then again, Baryou had always been like this.

The beauty with the cruel eyes who had interpreted for Baryou was his and Basen's older sister. Her name was Maamei and she had two children of her own. Basen and Baryou resembled their father Gaoshun, but Maamei took after her mother, who had been Jinshi's wet nurse. For that reason, Jinshi still found Maamei somewhat intimidating.

She resembled her mother in more than looks; she'd also inherited her strong will, and Jinshi was given to understand that Maamei quite dominated her husband. Until a few years before, she'd also regarded her father Gaoshun with all the affection she would feel for a hairy caterpillar, although she claimed that at some point she'd upgraded him to "moth."

She was, however, also the only person Jinshi knew who could wrangle the otherwise difficult-to-handle Baryou. He might have passed the civil service exam with flying colors, but he had ended up quitting his job due to a combination of poor health and unique ideas. And given his minimal ability to build new relationships, he found himself the target of a good deal of resentment almost before he knew what had happened. His colleagues and superiors had

come to dislike him before they'd ever had the chance to get to know him. All of it had ended up giving him a stomach ailment.

Talent Baryou had in spades, but his personality made things difficult. In that respect, he was somewhat like the members of the La clan, although they tended to combine their personal quirks with a forcefulness of spirit that left *others* with the upset stomachs. It was enough to make a person jealous of their brazen approach to life. If only Baryou could have half—for that matter, even one-tenth—the La clan's disregard for what people around him thought.

Basen sighed and put the finished work on Jinshi's desk. Jinshi started to review what Baryou had done, but one of the papers made him stop and frown. It was a circular that Jinshi himself had sent for approval to a series of other departments. Once again, it had been rejected as unfeasible. How many times was this now?

"So they really won't do it," he said.

"Rejected again, sir?" Basen asked.

"It's the timing. If it were for next year, they would approve it."

"The martial service exams are next year, aren't they?"

"Yes. Someone thinks we should wait for those."

What was this idea of Jinshi's that was failing to get approved? It was to expand the military. He wanted more troops stationed in the north, but the proposal had been slapped down. The martial service exams were essentially the soldiers' equivalent of the civil service test. They weren't as well attended as the bureaucrats' version, but still they would no doubt attract plenty of strong young men who would make excellent officers.

The military had been shrinking these past few years, for two reasons. One was a simple lack of wars, but the other was a personnel matter. Specifically, the two people who stood at the top of the military hierarchy.

"Grand Commandant Kan and Grand Marshal Lo," Basen said.

The Grand Marshal was the highest-ranking civil official involved in military matters. The Grand Commandant, for his part, was considered one of the *san gong*, the three most important leaders of the country, and like the Grand Marshal, his was a military role.

"I must wonder how Grand Commandant Kan attained that title," Basen said. Jinshi would have liked to know the same thing, but all he had to go on were some unsettling rumors. Some claimed that once Lakan had finished dispensing with all those who opposed him, there were no other high-ranking officials to take the post. Others said that he had been favored by the former emperor's

mother, the empress regnant, and that it was she who had guaranteed his swift rise in the world. Still others held that after ascending the throne, the current Emperor had set Lakan to taking care of any relatives who might envision themselves on the country's high seat.

"Truth be told, I'm not sure," Jinshi said. One thing he thought he knew, or at least could guess, was *why* the man had sought such great power. Maomao had spoken of it once, although with open disgust the entire time. She'd said that there was something he could not get without power. Lakan was a man who would do anything to get what he wanted—but there were not that many things he wanted. He wasn't the kind to let his greed multiply endlessly.

"A military man ought to *want* a little more," Jinshi grumbled. Someone who would make any pretext to have more pawns at his disposal would be easy to understand, easy to work with. But if Lakan had his board games, his family, and some sweet treat to enjoy, then he was satisfied. In fact, he wanted very little out of life, but he was irrepressible in action, and that was what made him such a thorn in the side of those around him.

"Perhaps if you were to try speaking directly with Grand Commandant Kan..." Basen suggested.

"I think that would cause more problems than it solved," Jinshi said. Lakan did not like him very much, for reasons that should be obvious. Sometimes he would drop by Jinshi's office and waste his time, eating some snack and filthying up the paperwork. He hadn't been seen much in these parts recently, and Jinshi knew why—he was busy hanging around the medical office. He could well imagine how displeased Maomao must be.

"Grand Marshal Lo, then," Basen said. Not just anyone could hope to simply sit down for a chat with the Grand Marshal, but Jinshi was the Imperial younger brother. Basen assumed that would be enough to get him in the Grand Marshal's door—but it wouldn't be that easy.

"Have you forgotten where Sir Lo's allegiance lies?" Jinshi said. Grand Marshal Lo held his position by the personal appointment of the reigning Emperor. And why had the Emperor been willing to push through that appointment? "Do you believe our mother...ahem, I mean the Empress Dowager would ever permit it?"

The Emperor might be substantially older than Jinshi, but the same mother had given birth to both of them. The Empress Dowager had entered the rear palace as only a servant, but the former emperor had chosen to take her into his bed as a consort. Many in the rear palace had sought the Empress Dowager's life

at the time. With all the former emperor's siblings dead of disease, everyone knew that her son—the one who would later become Jinshi's older brother and the reigning Emperor—would be crown prince.

Even more sought to curry the Empress Dowager's favor in hopes of gaining power for themselves, but Lo, it was said, had been her ally since her days as a palace woman. Barely ten years old, she'd become the emperor's favorite, such that although she was a palace woman, she was permitted to go outside the rear palace at times. Always with a bodyguard, of course—and that guard was frequently Lo.

Jinshi wondered what Lo must have thought of this palace woman whose body was barely developed enough to bear a child. She'd had other guards, but he was the only one she had given such patronage to later. He had clearly earned her trust. And yet, he must have felt some hesitation as well. He would not defy her orders—but she was just too kind a woman.

The system of slavery had already been shrinking, but the Empress Dowager's influence loomed large in its final abolishment. And in the rear palace, she reached out to those who had become the former emperor's bedmates and could no longer leave the rear palace. Yet her goodness could sometimes be a liability. She hated war. She rarely spoke about the matter publicly, but she wielded substantial influence with the Emperor and the Grand Marshal.

Jinshi could talk to the Emperor; he would understand. Indeed, he already approved of Jinshi's idea. Still, though he was the Emperor, he was only the Emperor—not an absolute ruler. That was why Jinshi's memorandum was stuck in limbo: if it never got to the Emperor, he couldn't officially approve it.

Perhaps he and Lo might have found some common ground had Jinshi held some sort of military position, but he'd spent years as a "eunuch" in the rear palace, performing only his ritual duties as the Emperor's younger brother. It left people unsure how to deal with Jinshi. He'd been given the rank of Grand Protector, but this was normally an honorary title, something awarded to people who were retiring from the public eye.

Considering that Jinshi was the Emperor's younger brother, some said he should have been made Prime Minister. In addition to his youth, however, there were other qualified candidates for that position, and so the calls quieted. One might have expected an honorary title to bring with it only a minimum of actual work. That might have been nice, but instead he found himself deluged with papers, every day a rush to get things done. They seemed to take him for some sort of jack-of-all-trades.

“So much time wasted talking about piddling details,” Maamei broke in, replacing their now lukewarm tea with fresh.

“Sister, politics turns on such delicate matters,” Basen said.

“Delicate? Hardly a word I associate with you,” she said with a mocking edge. Basen’s lip twisted, but as hot-tempered as he might be, even he knew that he wouldn’t get the best of his sister. “What it comes down to is, you want to get them to accept your demands,” Maamei said.

“If it were as simple as that, I wouldn’t be losing so much sleep,” Jinshi said. He was no happier than Basen about Maamei’s interjection. She was simply supposed to be an assistant; it wasn’t her job to go pontificating about political matters.

“I’m not saying it’s simple. I’m just saying possibilities arise, if you keep yourself open to them.”

They weren’t sure what she had in mind. She went over to Baryou’s corner and disappeared behind his screen. They heard a series of exclamations—“Sister!” “Hey, you can’t just—” “Argh!” It seemed it wasn’t only Basen who was cowed by Maamei.

When she emerged, lo and behold, she was holding the notorious Go book. She hadn’t needed to steal her brother’s copy; there’d been plenty of them right in Jinshi’s desk drawer.

“Do you recognize this?” she said, taking out a piece of paper tucked into the book. For a second, Jinshi thought it was the promotional leaflet about the book that he’d seen before, but then he realized it was something else.

“A Go tournament?”

“Yes,” Maamei said. The paper announced it proudly.

“I didn’t see that in any of *my* copies,” Jinshi said. Not in the ones Maomao had given him, or in the ones Sei had bought.

“Did you purchase them yourself, Master Jinshi?”

“No, I sent someone to do it for me.”

“Ah. Perhaps they thought you would object, then.” Maamei pointed to the details of the tournament, outlined on the paper. It would be held at the end of the year. There would be a fee of ten copper coins to participate. And...

Jinshi goggled. The location of the tournament was to be a lecture hall on the palace grounds.

His jaw hung open and he couldn’t seem to close it.

“*That* is abuse of power if I ever saw it,” Basen said, astounded.

Maamei said, “Go connoisseurs are supposed to make up one percent of the

population. If there are 800,000 people in the capital, that would make 8,000 players. How many do you think are going to participate in this tournament?" She made it sound like a riddle.

People wouldn't have to buy the book to know about the tournament—word would spread among friends. And anyone could pay ten copper coins; even a child could afford it if she saved her allowance. It was impossible to say how widely the book was being read, or exactly how many people might be or become interested in Go. The thought of how many people might show up for the tournament was frightening.

"If they tried to hold the tournament in a marketplace, the venues that could accommodate them would be limited. Most open spaces are given over to markets, so getting permission to use one would be difficult. The Merchants' Association keeps its own counsel in such matters. Even bureaucrats find it difficult to throw their weight around with them."

"That doesn't mean he should hold it in the palace! It can't be done!"

Maamei pointed a finger at Jinshi as if to say that was precisely her point. "I agree, and I'm sure he's not happy about having to do it that way. After all, how many potential participants could actually enter the palace grounds? Very few. No doubt he would have been overjoyed to get a proper tournament venue out in public somewhere."

"I see," Jinshi said slowly, looking at the pile of paperwork.

"Indeed. Everyone may try to push everything on you, but you may find that once in a while you want to push back, using the rights of your office." Maamei gave him a significant look.

"I seem to be veritably surrounded by strong and intelligent women," he said.

"Nothing of the sort," Maamei replied. "It's simply that they're the only ones who can get close to you."

The remark wasn't self-deprecating. Jinshi and Basen traded a look, both of them clearly feeling outmatched. Jinshi found himself having to take back what he had thought a few minutes earlier: Maamei understood politics very well.

Chapter 5: Cards

"If you have a trump card to play," Maamei had said to Jinshi, "it's better to use it sooner than later."

Prompted by her remark, Jinshi found himself outside Lakan's office. He'd sent a messenger the day before to alert him to his business, but to be completely honest, he wasn't sure if the Grand Commandant was going to be there. He probably wasn't, he thought as he entered.

"Pardon me," he said.

To his surprise the eccentric strategist was there, lying on a couch and sipping from a gourd. To all appearances he was quite at his ease, but a secretary placed some paperwork sheet by sheet on a table and gave Lakan a stamp to press on them. "Ah, His Majesty's esteemed younger brother. And how might I help you?" Lakan drawled.

Jinshi wasn't sure how Lakan had recognized him—maybe it was because of the messenger he'd sent. Maomao had told him the strategist was abysmal at telling one face from another.

If Jinshi were to behave the way the strategist did, he was sure Basen would take him to task for it. And he wished Lakan would stop using mooncakes as paperweights. They left little round oil stains on the documents.

Basen wasn't there at the moment; Jinshi had a different bodyguard. He'd been pretty sure Basen would never get along with the strategist, but he'd also been warned against going to see Lakan completely unprotected.

He had another companion as well—Maamei. Lakan spared each of them a glance before returning his gaze to Jinshi. It was abundantly clear he didn't like what—or *whom*—he was seeing.

"Please, be seated. No one wants to talk standing up. Come, now, not even any snacks for our guests?" He was being completely reasonable, but the juice he poured for them came out of his gourd—the one he'd been drinking from until a second ago. Didn't he remember getting food poisoning from drinking directly from the container? His aide rushed to get fresh drinks.

Mister Monocle made a show of stroking his unkempt beard. "Now, what brings you here today?"

“It sounds like you’re planning a most interesting event—but in a less than ideal location.” Jinshi pulled out the piece of paper that had been tucked in the pages of the Go book and placed it on the table. “Did you get official permission to use one of the palace lecture halls?”

“Oh, that.” Lakan looked away, and his lower lip stuck out a little, almost like he was pouting. “I’m the one in charge. If there were any objections, I might have expected them to come from Old Lo. Surely this is outside the Imperial younger brother’s purview.”

It’s none of your business, so screw off, seemed to be the message.

Jinshi’s smile never faltered, even as he knew he was dealing with someone who saw people’s faces as Go stones. Against Lakan, he was robbed of the one weapon in his arsenal in which he had complete confidence—but the strategist’s aide promptly flushed and looked at the ground.

“I wouldn’t expect someone as serious and hardworking as yourself to understand, but ever since the envoys from the west went home, people have been starved for entertainment,” Lakan said.

“Starved? There are more trade goods available than ever before.” Everything Jinshi had heard told him that the shops were full of unusual items and the markets were bustling.

“Ha ha. That may be so, but a fine meal leaves a diner craving the next great dish, and such memorable happenings have left the people seeking something more. Something even better to amuse the tongue or dazzle the eye. Let it be said that exotic goods from foreign lands are of scant use when one has no money in one’s pocket to buy them. And taxes *have* crept up lately, bit by bit. It’s a subtle thing, but I gather the rates are growing onerous out in the farming villages. And what are these strange new laws I hear about? Encouragements to eat insects? I don’t prefer *six-legged* dishes myself, but perhaps you do, honored brother of the Emperor?”

Jinshi said nothing.

“Go is a simple pleasure, something one can indulge in with nothing but a few stones. Doesn’t it seem the perfect way to disperse the malaise that hangs over the people?”

Lakan was hitting him where it hurt. Having tried the malnourished grasshoppers himself, well—if you asked Jinshi whether they were good or bad, his answer would emphatically not be the former. Likewise, the increase in taxes was a hedge against grain shortages. The tax hike was the one proposal of his that had passed readily. He wasn’t sure what that said.

By this point, Basen would have been all over Lakan. Jinshi had been right to leave him behind. He took a deep breath and, still smiling, said, “I think you’re laboring under some kind of misapprehension, Sir Lakan.” He let his fingers slide along the leaflet, stopping on the word *Location*. “I have no qualms with the tournament itself. Only with where it’s being held.”

“Well, what do you want me to do? Where *should* I hold it? I’m a man of few friends. I don’t have the connections to bring the merchants around to my point of view.”

Jinshi knew that very well. He did, however, think Lakan might have had at least one friend who could help him in this situation—but this wasn’t the time. “Let me suggest *this* venue,” he said, producing a piece of paper on which was written *Argent Theatre*. It was the same place where the White Lady had displayed her miracles, but it had been closed ever since her arrest. It had a prime location along a major thoroughfare, the perfect place for a competition like Lakan’s. The whole matter involving the White Lady had been left to Jinshi, for reasons he didn’t fully understand. But he was pleased that the piecemeal work he’d been given was finally proving helpful in some way.

The Argent Theatre was the “trump card” to which Maamei had so astutely alerted him. The place couldn’t remain closed forever, she’d said, and, even if one did suspect the theater owner of being in league with the White Lady, in her opinion they’d been punished quite enough.

Now, there were civil officials who had been poisoned by the White Lady; the owner was never going to get off simply by claiming he’d only given her a place to perform and had known nothing about what her act involved. Basen had been irate at Maamei’s suggestion, but his sister had replied: “There’s more to politics than punishing people. We get him to play along, do everything he can for us. If we’re careful about how we squeeze him, he’ll thank us and ask us for more. Isn’t that what a wise ruler would do? And if there *are* any problems, it’s Grand Commandant Kan running the show. There should be plenty of soldiers around to curtail any trouble.”

Lakan himself was a profound hassle to deal with, but of fine subordinates he had an abundance. There would be people to help out on the day. Plenty of military types to contain any problems that arose.

If Maamei had been a man, she would have been Jinshi’s aide, and he would have trusted her implicitly. She was quick-witted and had studied swordsmanship until she got married. Unlike her brothers, each of whom inclined a little too far to either mind or muscles, Maamei seemed able to do

anything.

Lakan scowled, but he looked intrigued by Jinshi's suggestion. "The Argent Theatre? What's that?" he asked. His question was directed not at Jinshi, but at his solicitous bureaucrat. Jinshi had been under the impression that the Argent was fairly well-known. He was surprised Lakan hadn't heard of it.

"It's a theater in the north of the capital, near the residential area. It is, however, currently closed after a series of performances there by a miracle-worker called the White Lady," the other man said.

"The White Lady?"

Jinshi knew Maomao made no effort to remember things that didn't interest her, but Lakan went above and beyond. Jinshi could hardly believe that he had no recollection of someone who had caused so much commotion.

"It's the place Rikuson went with Master Lahan and Miss Maomao," the aide advised him.

"Ah! *That* place!" the strategist said, leaping off his couch and pounding the table. He was shaking with rage now that he remembered it. Jinshi suspected he'd wanted to go there too.

"Might I continue?" Jinshi asked with mounting annoyance. Lakan looked put out, but sat down. "The Argent would be a perfect location. More than enough space. Far preferable to the lecture hall, which would be accessible only to those permitted to enter the palace."

"You're saying you'd approve the event there?"

"Yes. It's currently shut down, but I can have it opened again. I came to ask for your opinion, however. Instead of simply allowing them to resume their normal activities, might it not be better to hold an event there ourselves, overseen by someone who could keep things in check if need be?"

Everything Jinshi was saying was true, as far as it went. And no further. He felt a trickle of cold sweat: Lakan might not be able to judge people's expressions, but he had other ways of knowing what was going on. Other gifts that compensated for his inability to distinguish faces. For one thing, he was exceptionally good at sniffing out lies.

At the moment, Lakan was staring at Jinshi as if trying to peel away the layers of his words, his plans. He looked Jinshi in the eye and stroked his chin. "And what is your purpose in making this generous suggestion?" he asked.

Jinshi fought off a desire to swallow hard. He took a single breath to steady himself.

"The same as always."

At last Maamei stepped forward. She placed a pile of paper on the table. “We’re returning to you matters that should always have been in your hands, Sir Lakan. Naturally, we’ve also given the other officials back *their* work as well.”

“I think I see.” Lakan looked at the pile with undisguised distaste. It was three times as much work as he’d been listlessly doing earlier. Maamei had brought as much as she could carry, but there was still more back at Jinshi’s office.

Jinshi’s hardworking streak caused him to try to take care of all the various paperwork he received, but Basen, his second-in-command, wasn’t gifted when it came to desk work, and the Go-loving bureaucrat Sei was merely on loan from somewhere else and didn’t feel he was in a position to express his opinion on such lofty matters. With the arrival of Baryou and Maamei, it was decided to give the work back to those from whom it had come.

“You don’t think I’ll simply shove it back your way, *honored* Imperial younger brother?”

“Oh, there’s not enough there to warrant the effort. You could go through it with a snack in one hand, yawning all the while, and you’d still be done by this afternoon.”

Lakan’s aide looked openly terrified—Jinshi’s words were nothing short of a provocation—but Jinshi saw nothing to gain by holding back at this moment. He was confident that Lakan would do as he asked, even if Jinshi did put his nose a bit out of joint in the asking.

“You need the Argent Theatre, and you need the surrounding street closed off for an entire day. Who else can do that for you but me?” Jinshi asked.

Lakan looked at his assistant. “If we change the venue to the theater, what happens?”

“One expects that the number of participants would increase dramatically, sir. We would see far more commoners and children. Enough that I doubt our plan to hold the proceedings in a single day would suffice.” It was a shame for him; he would surely be expected to help—outside of normal working hours. “We’ll have to consult Master Lahan to be certain, but I think we would need at least three days, including time to get the place ready. Also, since we don’t know how many more people might show up, we might find ourselves short on Go boards. We’d have to get more of them, or else reconsider whether to put a cap on the number of participants.” The aide’s fear seemed to be giving way to volubility.

“No caps. The whole point is for as many people as possible to play Go,” Lakan said. It took Jinshi by surprise. He’d always assumed the strategist

thought only of himself.

Then again, when he'd spoken to Lahan before having this meeting, the other man had said, "My honored father is acting differently this time. That Go book is his tribute to my dear departed mother." Even the notion of holding a tournament like this was out of character for Lakan—but he had a reason. He'd bought out the former courtesan who was Maomao's mother, but she had died barely a year later. Lakan had created his book to commemorate a woman who had been a master Go player, preserving the records of their games—and this tournament was an extension of that impulse. This was not one of his ordinary flights of fancy.

While Jinshi was lost in thought, Lakan's aide had been drawing up a simple schedule. "If we say admission is half price for those who sign up ahead of time, we'll be able to gauge the level of interest. An admission fee of five copper pieces would enable even those with the lowest incomes to take part if they so wish. We're also considering prize money for the top performers." (Jinshi knew that one copper piece could buy a steamed bun; Maomao had told him once.) Now in his element, the aide showed none of his previous hesitancy. This man didn't have the obvious quirks that had characterized Lakan's last assistant, Rikuson, but it seemed he wasn't entirely undistinguished either.

Lakan folded his arms and regarded the mountain of paperwork. He still looked unhappy about it. Maybe one more push.

"There's something else," Maamei said, and produced, of all things, a list of names. It appeared to enumerate the medical staff. "An event this large brings with it the possibility of unexpected trouble. In addition to security, I think we should have some people versed in medicine present."

Strictly speaking, the idea was well beyond a court lady's place to suggest, but Jinshi wanted to give her a thumbs-up and an emphatic "Nice work!" If Jinshi had tried to bring the subject up, it might only have made things worse, but now Lakan's eyes were sparkling. The list included the names of two of the people he loved most in the world: his daughter and his uncle.

"I-If you insist, then...I suppose I have no choice," Lakan said.

It was all Jinshi could do not to grin openly. He'd finally forced a concession out of an opponent who always seemed to be the one giving him the short end of the stick. It was just one small step, really a trivial one, but for Jinshi it was a giant leap.

He was basking in this feeling of triumph when Maamei nudged him, giving him a look that said *don't let your guard down yet.*

“If you would be so kind as to write up the details and send them to me, then,” Jinshi said.

“Hrm,” Lakan grunted, apparently taking the compromise in bad grace. He waved his empty gourd at his aide, demanding more; to Jinshi’s surprise, the man hurriedly produced another gourd and gave it to the strategist. Lakan took a mouthful—and spat it right back out.

“Master Lakan?” the aide said.

“What in blazes is this?!”

“Erm, it’s—uh—it should be juice, sir,” the aide said, checking the gourd’s contents with an expression of concern.

“Well, something’s wrong with it. You didn’t get it from the usual place, did you?” Lakan was good and upset now.

“I-I’m sorry, sir! It appears to be fruit liquor...” The aide rushed to get some water.

“I’ll show myself out,” Jinshi said, eager to leave before he couldn’t keep a straight face anymore. As he left, he found that Lakan’s next visitor was already waiting.

“Ah! Oh, ahem—ah. Moon Prince...” A young civil servant clutching an armload of wood writing strips bowed his head at Jinshi’s appearance. Certain departments preferred the wooden strips to paper—and those who were especially obsessed with propriety and decorum seemed to love them most of all. Jinshi wondered which office this young man had come from.

“Let me see those.” Lakan got up from his couch and snatched the strips from the official. He turned and made for a large desk in the corner of his office on which there was a map with pawns arranged on it. He studied the writing strips, shifting the figures around as he read. “Let’s do this, then.”

“Y-Yes, sir,” said the young official, making a note of every movement. Jinshi spared him one last glance as he left the room. The entire court knew Lakan as the eccentric strategist, and while the emphasis tended to be on *eccentric*, one could not forget that he was also a strategist, and that as he moved those pawns across the map, soldiers marched in their hundreds, their thousands, even their tens of thousands.

Lakan was not like Jinshi, who had been given a civil post as befitted the Emperor’s younger brother, but an empty one. Jinshi could only sigh at his own ordinariness—and wonder how an ordinary person like him was going to outwit a genius like that.

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Chapter 6: Thunderclap

It was an autumn afternoon, and Maomao and her father were both looking puzzled.

“Think it might rain today?” her father asked, looking at the sky out the window of the medical office.

“Cats and dogs...uh, sir,” she said, catching herself before she spoke too brusquely to him. There were other members of the medical staff around and she had to be careful. Yao and En’en weren’t there, however. As the medical assistants grew more comfortable with their jobs, they were increasingly assigned to different places, wherever there was work to be done. Maomao happened to have been sent to help out today at the medical office where her father worked.

Luomen held a message in his hands—orders from one particular person. The problem lay in exactly who that person was.

“Guess he’s been hard at work. I’m a little surprised,” mumbled a young physician nearby, seemingly in spite of himself. Maomao had met him when she was working for Jinshi—and if you’re wondering, no, she hadn’t learned his name yet.

“He ought to be. He *ought* to be working,” Luomen said, but he sounded somewhat less firm than usual.

“What does Grand Commandant Kan want with you, though, Dr. Kan?”

In short, the freak strategist was trying to foist his work on Maomao’s dad. The letter was phrased as a polite request, not an order, but nothing about the contents said *if you’d be so kind*.

“I must admit, I’m not confident that I’m the best person for an interrogation,” Luomen said. He was being asked to speak to a trio of suspects. Normally, that would be the business of some legal functionary. Why ask a doctor to do it?

“One might have expected them to be a little more discreet about a matter like this,” Maomao said.

“Yes, one might,” Luomen agreed. The suspects were three soldiers—this was an internal investigation.

“What exactly is it that you’re supposed to ask them about?” the young doctor inquired. He seemed like the kind who was too professional to ask gossipy questions, but it appeared his interest had been piqued.

“I can see why they might want to keep this quiet. There’s a woman involved,” Luomen said.

“A w-w-woman?” said the doctor, studying the ground with all the embarrassment of an innocent boy.

Why do *they want my old man to handle this?* Maomao wondered. Maybe there hadn’t been anyone else suited to the task. She grew more surprised, however, the more she learned about the interrogation subjects. “They all have the same family name,” she said.

The number of family names in Li amounted to no more than several dozen, so it wasn’t unusual for people to share a name, but for all three of the suspects to happen to have the same one—that was a little odd.

“They’re brothers. Triplets, at that,” Luomen said.

“Triplets?” That got the attention of both Maomao and the young doctor.

“A woman claims that one of the three tried to force himself on her, but she brought her charges without being completely certain which of them it was. Since the woman is related to a soldier, it was decided that the investigation should begin as an internal matter. However...”

“Yes? What?”

“The triplets’ father is a high-ranking official with the Board of Justice, and he’s insisting that no trial can be held until they know for sure which of the three did it. My understanding is that this wouldn’t be the first time the boys have used their father’s privilege to shield them from responsibility for their wrongdoings.”

Geez, Maomao thought with an instinctive scowl.

“We’ll have one chance and one chance only to question them, and to make it clear who committed the crime. We must not fail.”

That was why the freak strategist had turned to Luomen. Why he’d suddenly become such an industrious worker remained a mystery, but he continued to display excellent judgment in his choice of operatives. Maomao’s father was brilliant, a man who could hear one fact and deduce ten more.

Luomen wasted no time; he went to hear the young men’s stories the very next day. “Would you come with and write down what they say, Maomao? I’d like to have a third party’s opinion.”

“I’d better not. I always bring out the freaks.” Or more precisely, the freak.

She shook her head, imagining what would happen if the strategist showed up.

"You needn't worry. Lakan won't be there."

"All right, fine, but what about Yao and En'en?" She glanced over. The two were working in the same office as she was today, and they would be sure to notice if she slipped away.

"I've spoken to them. Yao declined; she said she's not versed in shorthand."

Neither am I, Maomao thought, but she chose not to say it. If Yao happened to overhear, she might go ahead and volunteer—and En'en would *never* let her be in a room with men accused of perpetrating violence against a young woman. No, the wise choice here was to stay silent. Yao might be frustrated by her own shortcomings, but she was willing to accept the limits they placed on her.

Yao had been watching Maomao regretfully from behind a post for some time now. Behind her, En'en was waving a white handkerchief as if to say *Get going! See you later!*

"I guess we'd best be going," Maomao said, knowing that the sooner they got started, the sooner they would be finished.

They were given a conference room amidst the military offices in which to work. It wasn't cramped, but it wasn't spacious either, more of an interrogation chamber than a real meeting room.

The incident they were here to investigate had occurred about five days ago. The question was which, if any, of the men had laid hands on a fourteen-year-old girl. Maomao assumed someone would try to claim that it was partly the girl's fault for letting herself be taken in by a handsome face, but there had been a sudden thunderstorm that day and the girl, who'd gotten separated from her attendant, said she'd been scared.

That's the day I went shopping with Yao and En'en. Maomao felt a flash of anger; she wanted to find some way to punish the man who had taken advantage of a frightened girl. *No, no. Calm down.* She had to remain fair-minded. They didn't know for certain which of the triplets was the culprit, and there was, admittedly, the possibility that the accusation was false.

"Oh, it's you!" said the soldier who met them at the door. Maomao recognized the big mutt—er, that is to say, Lihaku.

"Thank you for being here," her father said with a polite bow.

"Sure. If there's any trouble, just shout. There's another official in there, a secretary, but he's just a bureaucrat." He thumped his broad chest, outgoing and direct as always.

“What brings you here, Master Lihaku?” Maomao asked.

“Orders from above. The suspects being who they are, we can’t have anyone getting violent. They wanted a capable guard on hand. Plus, I outrank those three brothers, and I know you. I think that’s why they chose me.”

“Very interesting.” It made sense. Although it might have been more accurate to say not that Lihaku knew Maomao, but that he knew Maomao would be impartial.

“Besides, assignments like this are a nice change of pace from time to time.” Lihaku grinned at her, ever the good-natured fellow. She noticed that the sash of rank around his waist was different from before.

“Looks like you’re really moving up in the world, if I may say so,” she said.

“Sure am. Thing is, I’ve started getting so much desk work that my body is losing its edge.”

Maomao was eager to know how much money he was making these days, but she knew it would be uncouth to ask, so she refrained. She was most curious, however, if he would be able to redeem Pairin, the Princess of the Verdigris House whom he so adored.

“My apologies for the interruption, but might I ask you a few things?” Luomen said, looking at Lihaku.

“Oh! Yes, of course. Sorry, go ahead.”

“It sounds like you have some personal acquaintance with these three young men. What kinds of people are they?”

Lihaku put his hand to his chin thoughtfully. “You know, I’m not quite sure how to answer that. All three of them are clever scoundrels. They look identical, and they even sound a lot alike. I guess their personalities are pretty similar too. I couldn’t be sure, though—I haven’t known them long enough to really tell one from the others. I guarantee no one meeting them for the first time could tell them apart, and I think they’re using that to give that young lady the runaround. They’re good-looking, no doubt about that. Definitely handsome enough to pull the wool over an idealistic girl’s eyes.”

“Hoh.”

“That’s why they only go after sheltered girls, young women who don’t know how the world works. There’s even... There’s even stories that they’ve assaulted girls as young as twelve years old.” Lihaku looked like he found the idea incomprehensible.

That tears it. We don’t need the likes of them. Trying to make time with girls who might not even be menstruating yet—the thought was as much as Maomao

could stand. She could imagine a great many of the girls crying themselves to sleep after it was all over.

Her father nodded. “Are the brothers close with each other?”

“Not to speak of,” Lihaku said. “Once, one of them screwed up on the job, and when there was an inquest to see who’d made the mistake, there was no covering for each other or trying to help each other out. In fact, they all seemed to want to make it as bad as possible for the others.”

“So, this mistake—they didn’t try to conspire to keep it under wraps?”

“You think they could? Lak—I mean, the monocled old fart, he’d see right through them.” How nice of Lihaku to remember what Maomao had told him.

The freak strategist was basically worthless as a human being, but he was good at Go, Shogi—and judging character.

He should’ve dealt with this case himself, then, Maomao thought. Then again, what they really needed was hard proof. Even if he had a gut feeling who the perpetrator was, they’d have to produce some evidence.

“Phew, that was something to see! Oh, that reminds me,” Lihaku said.

“Yes?”

“I assume two of the three brothers will be honest. They do whatever they like, ’cause they know their father will protect them, so they won’t expect to be punished if they haven’t done anything wrong. I think they’ll tell the truth if they don’t think it will do them any harm.”

“You’re quite an honest person yourself,” Luomen said, his face softening into a smile that made him look like a kindly old lady.

“G-Gee, you think?” Lihaku said.

“In any case, thank you for your help. We’ll be counting on you to jump in if we need anything in the way of more...*physical* assistance.”

Her father walked into the room, and Maomao trotted after him.

They found a man with the air of a civil official waiting inside. He must have been the secretary Lihaku had mentioned. When he saw them, he got up from his chair and bowed. “They should be here soon. If you’d have a seat.”

“Thank you kindly,” Luomen said, sitting down. There was a table with a sheet of paper—which detailed the three brothers’ jobs as well as exactly who their family members were. *Are they trying to intimidate us?* Maomao wondered. The paper seemed to mean: *We’re here because the strategist ordered it, but you don’t have any authority to punish us.*

“Now, how are we going to handle this?” Luomen mused.

They were to speak to each of the three brothers individually, and the first of them had arrived. Time to get started. Maomao dipped her brush in ink, ready to take down everything she could.

○●○

You've clearly got something wrong somewhere, because I haven't done anything. I mean, for one thing, I find it unthinkable to lay hands on a girl a mere fourteen years old. What evidence do you have against me?

Hrm? Where was I five days ago? I was downtown, getting a drink after work. Anyone would want a tipple when they're finally off for the day, wouldn't they? I didn't want to break the bank, though, so I headed for the southern side of town—I know a place that sells good grape wine for cheap.

No, I didn't go to the pleasure district. That part of town's not for drinking, I can tell you that much. And you always run the risk of accusations just like this one. And you wonder why men say women are so frightening!

Thunder? Ah, yes, that huge thunderclap. I certainly do remember it. Who could forget a boom like that? The lightning must have struck very close to the capital—I heard that tremendous noise almost as soon as I saw the flash of light. I don't mind saying, it gave me a good start! The rain only got worse after that, so I stayed at the tavern until it let up.

You want to know when this all happened? It was right about the time the evening bell was ringing. First I saw the sky light up, then I heard the bell, and it wasn't a moment later that the thunder came.

So, as you can see, I'm completely innocent. You can ask the tavern keeper, he'll vouch for me. One of my younger brothers did it. Dispose of them however you like. But if you try to pin this crime on one of us without some very good evidence—well, I assume you know what'll happen to you.

○●○

The eldest brother was the first to speak to them. He was good-looking, just as Lihaku had said, but his pallor was poor and he was given to the occasional twitch. His fists were clenched, and stayed that way the entire time they questioned him. Perhaps he was hung over from the drink he was so fond of—or maybe it was nerves taking their toll on him. Nonetheless, he answered their questions with alacrity, although in a tone that defied them to finger the culprit.

Luomen gave a thoughtful "Hmmm" and stroked his chin. Maomao knew

that even if she and the secretary hadn't recorded a thing, her father would remember every word. He was simply that gifted.

The eldest brother left; in his place came a man who looked just like him, but with much better color in his cheeks. This was the middle brother, according to the paper. How polite of them to go from oldest to youngest, in an easily identifiable order.

○●○

What a pain. I'm trying to get my work done, you know, and you call me away for an interrogation? How do you plan to make this up to me when you realize I haven't done anything wrong?

Well, anyway. Since I haven't *done anything wrong, I'm perfectly happy to talk to you and get this over with, after which I* will *be leaving. I suppose you want to know where I was and what I was up to five days ago. I just happened to not have any duties that day, so I took a short trip on horseback. Not too far, though—I had work the next day, so I knew I had to be back by evening.*

What's that? Where did I go? Not far from the capital. And I was back in a hurry, since the heavens looked ready to open at any moment. I was tired, so I came home and went straight to bed. I'm sure you know which house is mine? Since you must know who my father is. Then again, maybe you don't—or you would never have dragged me here.

Do I have anyone who can vouch for my alibi? Well, there're my servants, but I don't suppose you'd believe them. I'm sure you'd whine and cry and claim that I ordered them to lie on my behalf. I'm afraid it is what it is, though. My quarters are in an annex, not the main house, so I doubt anyone else even noticed me coming or going.

You want to know where I was when the evening bell sounded? Ahh, you mean around the time there was that clap of thunder. Believe me, the rainstorm that came after that put the finishing touches on a tiring day.

It surprised me something terrible—the sky lit up just as the bell was sounding, and then there came that terrible crash. It must have been an awful fright for the bell ringers—they might well be struck by lightning themselves, being all the way up there. They weren't, of course... More's the pity.

There. Are you quite satisfied? I'm going back to work. It must've been one of my brothers who did it—the older or the younger. I'm sure you'll look into it. Very carefully, of course. We wouldn't want any...mistakes.

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This second brother was no less provocative than the first. He had a mocking smile on his face from beginning to end. Maomao caught a glimpse of blisters on the palm of his hand, but that wasn't surprising. As a soldier, he practiced swordsmanship and rode horseback. A few blisters was nothing unusual.

Maomao finished recording his testimony, scowling slightly. Her father nodded and made a twirling motion with his finger. They both wanted to get this farce over with.

The third and youngest brother came in. He looked, of course, just like the others. Maomao was getting a bit sick of that face, but she would have to suck it up. As for the youngest brother's health, he looked ordinary, neither ill nor particularly exuberant.

○●○

What, I'm last? Wish one of my brothers had gone ahead and confessed. I could have been spared all this. Ah, well. Can we hurry up and get through this? I'm already done with work for the day.

Five days back, I was working all day. Yes, yes, it was quitting time, but they'd piled some more work on me. Ugh. Go to the archives! Fetch this book! That's a bureaucrat's job, if you ask me. Blast that freak strategist... Ahem! No, er, I didn't say anything. Nothing at all. Anyway, I went to get the books, but I got to having a pleasant *chat with a court lady I bumped into. No, she wasn't fourteen! Her name and department? Err, it was... You know, I guess I don't remember.*

Which archive was I in? The storage building in the western quarter. Soldiers don't get out there too often. But at least I have a new friend to show for my little excursion.

So anyway, before I knew it, it was past time to go home. Yeah, I think I was in the archives when the evening bell rang. It was dark outside and there was a bit of a rain shower. I didn't hear the bell, but it must have been about then. But that thunder, oh yeah. I heard that. I had an armload of documents, and the flash spooked me so bad I dropped them all over the floor. I bent down to pick them up, but then I heard the sound—it felt like the earth was shaking! Boy, it was big.

How long before I finally worked my way to the floor? I was a bit dazed, but it couldn't have been more than four or five seconds.

There, how's that? I'm dying to get home, so I'll be on my way now, thank

you.

○●○

She'd hoped at least one of the brothers would turn out to be a halfway decent person, but no. All three of them were hopeless. Maomao was exhausted, and she'd only been transcribing the interviews.

Luomen, however, alone among the three of them, was nodding as if this somehow made sense to him. The secretary promptly went about making a clean copy of what he'd written down. Maomao leaned over, whispering so she wouldn't be overheard, and said, "Did you get anything, pops?"

"Eh. I think we have most of the pieces we need," he said. He sounded downright blasé. Maomao looked at him in confusion. She liked to think she'd picked up a thing or two from her dad, but there was still so much she didn't know—such as what was going through the old eunuch's head at that moment. "Perhaps we can organize our thoughts when we get back," he said. He lifted himself out of his chair, using his cane to steady himself.

Outside, they saw their would-be guard. "Didn't need ol' Lihaku, huh?" he said, although he sounded a bit dejected about it. Maomao was sure he would have loved an official excuse to punch in at least one of those three infuriating faces.

As soon as they got back to the medical office, Maomao's father requested a map of the capital and its environs. Maomao was just wondering if she would have to go to the archives to get it when Dr. Liu brought out a copy and saved her the trouble. "Just keep it clean," he warned them. Luomen, who'd had every intention of marking it up, quietly hid his brush. He looked around for something he could use instead and found some small ceramic knickknacks in various colors, normally used to keep medicine packets from flying away.

"What are you doing?" asked Yao. She and En'en came over with much curiosity. Dr. Liu could hardly object—they were both already done for the day. It was up to them what they did with their free time.

"Just trying to organize the information we have," Luomen said. "Would you two like to help?"

Yao flushed at the way he was obviously hoping they would say yes; she looked away, meaning: *Well, I suppose I have no choice*. It was very much like her to not quite be able to simply say "Yes." En'en was clearly burning the

image of her young mistress into her retinas; her intensity was a little frightening.

"For starters, one marker goes here," Luomen said, placing a red piece of pottery in the center of the capital.

"What's that represent?" Maomao asked.

"This is where they ring the evening bell, yes?" Luomen replied.

"Yes, that's the place. It's located so you can hear it anywhere in the city," Yao said. She knew very well where it was, since they'd walked right by it on that stormy day.

Next, Luomen put down three blue markers, one round, one triangular, and the other square. "The round one represents the eldest son—where he claimed to be at the time of the incident. The triangle is on the house where the second son said he was, and this square I've placed at the western archives, where the youngest claimed he was."

"So no two of them were in the same place on the day of the attack," Yao said.

"That's right. And this is where the young woman says she was." Luomen pointed again to the red object, right near the shopping district.

"But that..." Maomao said. It was right near where she and her friends had been.

Yao frowned. "If we'd found that poor, frightened girl, maybe none of this would have happened." She looked pained, then cast her eyes to the ground. They'd barely been able to see a thing for the rain that day—and anyway, they'd been intent on finishing their shopping as quickly as they could. They'd been too occupied for anything else.

"'If' means nothing in the face of what is already done," Maomao's father said, not unkindly. "The most we can do now is to help ensure that this doesn't happen to anyone else."

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“All three of the suspects claim they have witnesses who can testify to their whereabouts, but all three of their alibis seem fishy. Do you know which of them is lying, sir?” Maomao asked, mindful to speak politely in Yao and En’en’s presence.

“I believe I do. But first, I think a little more information would be helpful.” He looked at the three of them. “Do you all remember that thunderclap five days ago?”

“I do! What a noise!” Yao said.

“We were outside when it happened. It *was* quite surprising,” En’en added.

“You said you were near the bell tower, yes?” Luomen asked, tapping the red object. “And from what I’ve heard, the lightning struck near the northwestern part of the city.” He placed a yellow object by the city walls.

Maomao and the others blinked. They couldn’t fathom what he was getting at.

“Might I ask one more question?” Luomen said.

“Please do.”

“Which came first—the lightning and thunder or the evening bell?”

His question prompted En’en to clap her hands. Well, now. This was surprising. “The sky lit up at the same moment as the bell sounded, and then the thunder came after,” she said.

“I see you remember very well,” Luomen said appreciatively. Maomao realized that En’en’s memory must have been tied to her image of the flustered Yao. It was the only answer. *But why does he want to know that?* she wondered. She looked at the map, comparing the locations of the various objects—and gasped. She returned to what she’d written down during the interviews, looking at what the three men had told them.

“What’s the matter, Maomao?” Yao asked.

“Read this. Does it give you any ideas?” she asked, showing Yao the testimony, particularly the parts about the thunder.

“Hmm... Yeah. Something seems off.” She looked intently at the eldest brother’s testimony. “The order is wrong here.” His claim was, in a few words, that the sky lit up, then the bell sounded, and then the thunder crashed. “And here too!” she said as she read the second brother’s testimony. That claimed that the flash in the sky and the sound of the bell came at the same time, followed by a dramatic thunderclap. “This last one might be accurate, but it doesn’t say when the bell sounded.” The youngest brother had said that four or five seconds after the flash of lightning, the thunder had come like an earthquake. “So does that

mean the oldest and middle brothers are lying?" Yao asked.

"Not necessarily," Maomao replied. She thought to herself, *Now I see what this is about.* She looked at her old man, who was regarding the three of them with a gentle expression, waiting to see if they would reach the answer.

She remembered what Lihaku had said: that at least two of the brothers could be expected to tell the truth. The big mutt might not have needed to come in swinging, but he'd given them some very interesting advice all the same. If he was right, then the three men wouldn't try to cover for each other. He'd said the brothers who hadn't assaulted the girl wouldn't lie to Maomao and Luomen as long as they didn't think it would make trouble for them. Which led to one conclusion...

"Maomao, tell us what's going on here," En'en said.

Maomao looked at her father. "If indeed you've figured it out," he said with a smile.

Well, now she *really* wanted to get it right. She took a deep breath and got her thoughts in order, trying to decide where would be the easiest place to start. After a moment she said, "Yao, En'en—do you know how to tell how far lightning has struck from you?"

"You can tell by how loud the thunder is, right? And how soon you hear it after the flash..." Yao had a good head on her shoulders. She just needed a push to see the answer. "So you're saying that the earlier they heard the sound, the closer they were to where the lightning struck!"

Luomen nodded. Yao's brow wrinkled as she compared the three men's testimony.

"It's hard to work out the time line. They all mention the thunder, but they don't agree about the bell."

Her confusion was understandable. Maomao said, "The farther you are from the lightning, the longer it takes the sound of the thunder to get to you. Wouldn't the sound of the bell behave the same way?" That explained why the men reported hearing the sounds in different orders. And when they compared *those* details, only one man's testimony stood out as clearly wrong.

"It's the middle brother, isn't it? If he was really at his house when the thunder sounded, like he says, it wouldn't make sense." En'en used her fingers to measure the space between the yellow, red, and blue objects on the map. "Even without knowing the *exact* distance, you can see that if he was at home, there's no way he could have heard the bell at the same time he saw the lightning."

The bell tower was far from the house where the second brother claimed to have been. Instead, he'd heard the sounds in much the same order as Maomao and the others—meaning he was near the same place they had been.

"The middle brother must have been around here," En'en said, moving the blue triangle over beside the red object. Precisely, in other words, where the young woman said one of the men had accosted her.

Maomao, Yao, and En'en looked at Luomen. Was this what all his questions had been about from the start? *Who would think to establish a person's location by the sounds they heard?* Maomao thought, nearly unable to believe it.

"Now then, we have the secretary's records and our own conclusions. I think it's time we reported to Lakan," Maomao's old man said, heaving himself up from his seat.

"How did such an astonishing person end up as a eunuch?" Yao breathed. Maomao, supporting her old man with his bad knee, knew exactly how she felt. He was a doctor, yes, but one people could afford to value a little more highly.

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Chapter 7: The Expedition

Dry air brushed Jinshi's cheeks. As it had the past several days. Still, he hadn't been on a proper excursion since his trip out west. Watching the scenery go by as his carriage rumbled along wasn't a terrible way to pass the time, but he couldn't deny a desire to ride out across the fields on his own horse.

"You can just leave things here to us. Don't worry, our world will keep turning without you for a few days," said Maamei, who stood with her chest out proudly. Jinshi pretended he couldn't see Baryou (whose look said *Are you really leaving me here?*). Instead, with Maamei's proverbial push, he headed out to do his observations. His destination: a village where the crops had been ravaged by insects.

It meant a day and a half of riding along in a rattling carriage. In an effort to get the job done as fast as possible, Jinshi planned to change horses and drivers at each town. Despite the stiff pace he meant to set, he had at least ten people with him including his bodyguards. A relatively modest number for an expedition involving someone of Jinshi's status, but traveling large would only make things take longer. He pressed ahead with his comparatively small band in hopes of reaching the village that much quicker.

Likewise, in order to ensure that things went smoothly, he'd decided to be a bit...demanding about who would be on his staff.

"You're not uncomfortable simply sitting for so long, sir?"

"If you're so worried about it, let me ride."

"I'm afraid not, sir."

Sitting beside him was not Basen but Gaoshun. Basen *was* present, on horse among the guards. With apologies to him, Gaoshun was still more capable when it came to serving as Jinshi's aide-de-camp. Hence Jinshi had borrowed him from the Emperor. It was also, as it were, Jinshi's little revenge on His Majesty, who'd been making his own life easier by having Gaoshun do his work.

"Are you sure Baryou is going to be all right? Even with Maamei?" Jinshi asked. He was concerned. "I know he's always been somewhat frail. I thought I'd heard he was on bed rest at home on account of an illness."

Admittedly, it was Jinshi himself who had nonetheless pushed for Baryou to

enter his service, but he quailed at the thought of the man getting sick again.

"It was only his usual complaint." Gaoshun offered Jinshi a tangerine, already peeled—but not before he took a single segment and put it in his mouth. Jinshi wasn't sure it was really necessary to check such a trivial thing for poison, but making the practice habitual would discourage people from thinking about trying to poison something that might slip through the cracks.

"I know the gist of his story, but perhaps you could tell me the rest?" Jinshi gave Gaoshun an inquiring look as he took a bite of fruit. It was still sour, the perfect thing to wet his dry throat.

"Yes, sir. He never got along with his supervisor in his department, to the point that Baryou ended up with a hole in his stomach. The matter climaxed with an incident of copious vomiting on the supervisor's desk, after which Baryou was taken to the medical office and soon thereafter withdrew from his duties. That would have been about three months ago, as I recall."

And this was the man Gaoshun claimed was going to be just fine? Jinshi had known Baryou long enough to know that he wasn't always very comfortable around people—and that people he really didn't get along with could, well, give him the runs.

Gaoshun must have seen the concern on Jinshi's face, because he added placatingly, "There won't be any trouble. Maamei is with him. Ever since she had children, she's become a much more well-rounded person."

"Well-rounded?" She seemed just as forceful as ever to him. She must be, to come up with an idea like foisting the eccentric strategist's own work back on him.

"Indeed. For example, she's stopped complaining every time I touch my grandchild—as long as I wash my hands first."

Jinshi didn't say anything to that. Maybe it was simply the fate of this particular daughter's father. Gaoshun had spent many years with Maamei treating him like a cockroach.

Gaoshun had a distant look in his eyes, but as he gazed out the window he said, "There, you can see it."

Jinshi looked, and saw a village nestled among cozy rice fields. As they got closer, he could make out rows of simple houses. One of them was bigger than the others. A sentry stood at the village gate, watching Jinshi's party suspiciously.

"We'll go straight to the village headman's house. If that's all right?"

"Summon Lihaku for me first, if you would," said Jinshi.

Lihaku, a soldier who had the air of a friendly dog about him, never seemed particularly intimidated, even in Jinshi's presence. More importantly, he was a man of strong character, which made him most valuable. Jinshi had once again asked for him by name to be among the guards.

"As you wish, sir." Gaoshun called out the window for Lihaku. It might have been quicker for Jinshi to summon him personally, but it would be best if his face wasn't seen too often. He planned to wear his mask while outside. It wouldn't exactly make him look less suspicious, but with Gaoshun to vouch for him, he assumed even the village headman wouldn't press too hard about it. He'd relied on Basen for something similar before, but it had all been a bit...nerve-racking.

"Yes? What do you need, Master Jinshi?" Lihaku asked, hopping easily into the still-moving carriage. He'd known Jinshi back when he had been pretending to be a eunuch and eschewed the euphemistic nickname "Moon Prince" in favor of the name Jinshi had used in the rear palace.

"You're from the provinces, aren't you? How does this village strike you?"

"From the provinces? Yes, sir, albeit not around here. This village, though..." Lihaku looked out at it, not quite sure what to say. "The houses look awfully sturdy for a farming hamlet. I know they might seem pretty plain from your perspective, but they're perfectly respectable out here. I heard the insects really devastated this place, though."

It was the exposed and weathered posts that made the houses look something less than luxurious to Jinshi.

"My grandpa told me that grasshoppers don't just eat all the grain—they go for timbers and even textiles," Lihaku said. They had insatiable appetites—they seemed bent on robbing the people not only of their food, but of their clothes and shelter as well.

"According to reports, the only grain that survived was whatever had been fully harvested and put in the storehouses. Virtually everything else was consumed," Gaoshun said, reading from a piece of paper.

"It's enough to make your head hurt, isn't it?" Lihaku said, frowning. "Though I guess you could say we were almost lucky that it happened here and now." The damage would have been so much worse had the swarm come in the middle of the wheat harvest, or farther south, in rice country.

"It's hard to see from here, but I'm sure there are dead bugs all over the ground out there. It might look ugly, but they were able to keep damage to a minimum because orders had already gone out to get ready to exterminate the

insects.” Lihaku shook his head and sighed. It was a somewhat familiar way to behave around a member of the Imperial family, but Jinshi knew Lihaku was aware of his place, and chose to overlook the indiscretion. The choice was as much for Jinshi’s own benefit as for Lihaku’s—it made his life easier. Gaoshun could read Jinshi’s reaction and said nothing to Lihaku. If Basen had been here, he would have been all over the other soldier, and frankly it would have been a little bit annoying.

“Well, I’ll head back out,” Lihaku said. “Master Basen’s going to give me the glaring of a lifetime otherwise.”

Before he could leave, however, the carriage came to a halt. They must have arrived at the headman’s house. Basen didn’t seem to like the fact that Jinshi valued Lihaku’s service, and the big mutt wasted no time showing himself out. As for Jinshi, he put on his mask and emerged a moment later.

Though the timbers and roof showed some signs of having been nibbled on, the headman’s house was suitably impressive. Jinshi knew because of the touch of mockery in Lihaku’s tone as he remarked, “More of a mansion than a regular house, isn’t it?”

Canals ran around the mansion, flowing to a pond that had been created in the middle of the garden. It was a fancy idea, but the conspicuous lack of greenery made it appear forlorn. Specifically, trying to dress up a rice paddy as a pond was clever—too clever by half. But Jinshi would keep that to himself.

He stood behind Gaoshun. The headman appeared at the door, wringing his hands and bowing obsequiously to Gaoshun while shooting the masked man suspicious looks. He led them inside, where Jinshi surmised, based on Lihaku’s whispers, that the interior was just as relatively sumptuous as the exterior. Lihaku might look simple, but he was actually quite sharp.

“This way, if you please,” the headman said, leading them into a room where a feast had been prepared. The food looked rather poor to Jinshi, who’d had his fair share of ornate meals in the capital, but there was every chance it was more extravagant than might have been expected from a rural village headman.

Jinshi stayed silent. Gaoshun never so much as glanced at him, yet he knew what his master would want to say. “We’ve not come to eat. Tell us about the state of your village, this minute,” he said.

“Y-Yes, sir,” said the headman. To Jinshi, who was used to Gaoshun sounding deferential, the commanding tone was bracing. Even Maomao always spoke politely to him. It could get stultifying.

The headman promptly ordered a servant to take away the meal, leaving the

large table empty. The room had been thoroughly cleaned and the window offered a view of the garden. Jinshi suspected it was the headman's pride and joy, but at the moment it was strewn with insect corpses.

The headman brought out a map of the village.

"You can skip the pleasantries. Give us the situation. As many details as you can, but keep it short," Gaoshun said.

"Yes, sir. It started about two weeks ago..."

About two weeks ago, a black cloud had appeared on the northwestern horizon, the headman said. It had been a strange sight, a storm cloud outside the rainy season. They had soon noticed that the cloud was accompanied by a terrible buzzing. It was, in fact, no cloud, but a great swarm of grasshoppers.

The swarm reached the village and began eating all the unharvested rice in sight. The villagers fought back with torches and nets, but no matter how many they killed or caught, it never seemed to make a dent in the swarm's numbers. They simply continued to eat, and not just the rice, but the villagers' clothes and shoes—even their hair and skin felt the insects' bites.

The men would catch the grasshoppers and burn them or simply kill them. The women and children tried to shelter indoors; the women would kill any bugs that got through cracks in the walls, but the children could only hunch in the corner, trembling.

The grasshoppers' assault lasted three days and three nights.

"These are the clothes I was wearing that day," the headman said, holding up an outfit of sturdy hemp fiber. Holes had been made clean through it—and judging by the bright colors of the fabric, it wasn't time that had done the work. "We made insecticide, but the swarm was simply too big. We didn't stand a chance."

Jinshi bit his lip: so the chemicals hadn't been enough after all.

"And then there's this," the headman said, going out into the garden and brushing the trunk of one of the trees. "This was covered in new leaves... But the bugs ate every last one." He sighed deeply.

"Where are the bugs now?" Gaoshun asked.

"We killed all that we could, burned what we were able, and tried to gather the rest of the dead ones in the back of the village. Do you want to see them?"

They did. The headman led them out behind the mansion. As they went along, they started to see more dead locusts on the ground, and then the bodies began to crunch under their feet as they walked.

Jinshi remained silent as they approached the place. We'll refrain from a

detailed description; suffice to say a large hole had been dug, and a dark mound could be seen above the edge. A couple of the guards put their hands to their mouths, fighting the urge to vomit. Clearly some of the men in the detachment were not fond of insects.

"Is this all of them?" Gaoshun inquired.

"All of the ones we were able to stop," the headman replied.

"And about how many would you say got away from you?"

"I couldn't guess."

Gaoshun stroked his chin. "Basen."

He was quick to come when his father called. "Yes, sir?"

"Go to the other nearby villages and find out exactly how much damage has been done. If you take a swift horse, you should be able to get back in decent time."

"Yes, sir."

Basen went to ask the locals about other nearby settlements. Behind his mask, Jinshi raised his eyebrows and then let them drop again.

"Is something the matter, sir?" Gaoshun asked him quietly.

"Not exactly..."

Jinshi needed to deal with what had happened—but there was something even more important that required his attention. He asked himself what the demented apothecary would do if she were here.

Quite abruptly, he crouched down on the ground. The grasshoppers were dead and still, but he could see that their bellies were swollen. He'd heard before that locusts in swarms took on a darker coloration and their legs grew shorter. These were indeed dun-colored and plain.

Jinshi took out a small dagger. Without a word, he plunged it into the body of one of the bugs. He didn't enjoy the sensation—but he was certain that if Maomao were here, this was what she would have done. He went about dissecting one locust after another. The villagers watched the masked man in horror, but Jinshi couldn't afford to be bothered by what they thought of him. He lined up the carved bugs in a row.

"Those are..." Gaoshun started. He seemed to grasp what Jinshi was aiming at. Jinshi was no entomologist, but even he could guess what might have caused the stomachs to appear swollen. They were packed with what looked like long, yellow tubules.

It was autumn, and after autumn came winter. These insects wouldn't survive the cold months—they would entrust the future to the next generation.

“Eggs?” Gaoshun whispered, and Jinshi responded with a nod. Another thing he could guess was what the egg-laden insects would do next.

“This plague isn’t over yet,” he said softly, the mask muffling his voice. “We burn this land.”

Any surviving eggs had to be destroyed with fire—or the spring wheat harvest would fall to the spawn of these locusts.

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Chapter 8: Harassment

It was a cool autumn morning, and Maomao was just about to head to the medical office for work when she was stopped by a delivery. She would have been perfectly happy with a gift, but that's not what this was. At least, it wasn't the kind of gift she wanted.

"Is somebody harassing you? You know you can tell me, right?" Yao said, giving her a rare look of pity. The look was coming from a safe distance, though—Yao had backed up, frowning intensely.

"Not as such, no..." Maomao said, but she couldn't blame Yao for wondering, for inside the basket she'd received was something brown—a mass of dead bugs.

Grasshoppers, specifically.

Normally, it would have been a challenge to collect so many of them, but here they were—meaning they'd come from somewhere where the collecting wasn't so challenging.

"I left that there because it came from the higher-ups, but I'd be very happy if you would get it the hell out of here," Dr. Liu said, thoroughly unimpressed. He was older, the highest-ranking man in the medical office, which meant there were very few people to whom he felt the need to be deferential.

And take it where? Maomao thought. She didn't want a basket full of dead bugs in *her* room. She had a good idea who had sent it, but that only left her more puzzled about what to do.

Dr. Liu seemed to sense that she was between a rock and a hard place. He beckoned her over. "Use the empty room in the next building over," he said. "It wouldn't normally be mine to give you, but...hrm...just round up a few people with time to kill and do what you have to do. Quickly." He seemed to consider the matter to take priority over doing chores at the medical office. Very well then...

"Say, uh, what was all that about?" Yao asked, tugging on Maomao's sleeve. Her lovely features were marred by a look of distress.

Maomao grinned and decided to enlist the cowering Yao to help her with the bugs.

Yao put another insect on the scale, her pallor deathly. En'en observed her with a flush in her cheeks. For her part, Maomao was silent as she measured the grasshoppers' legs and wings.

"Um, h-how many more...bugs...do you need?" Yao asked, picking up a grasshopper with chopsticks and no small degree of loathing. She did not love bugs. They'd put ten of them on the scale, one by one; they would take the average of their weight.

"I don't suppose we need to weigh *all* of them," Maomao said. "But certainly the more the better." As she took her measurements, she put any specimens with unusual coloration into a separate pile.

"If you find you can't stand it, milady, I'll take over for you," En'en offered.

Yao, though, said, "N-No, I can do it. It's p-p-part of the job..." The question could only make her more determined not to be second best—as En'en had known perfectly well. That was why she'd said it.

"Young mistress..." En'en said; the flush was growing deeper, her heart beating harder, and goosebumps standing on her skin as she watched Yao work with the bugs.

Twisted, twisted, twisted, Maomao thought, giving them both something of a scowl. But she didn't stop working.

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They'd gotten through about a third of the pile when a visitor arrived—a small man with round spectacles, tousled hair, and, today, a grin. "Well, hullo." It was, needless to say, Lahan. Maomao didn't stop working, but now she looked angry. Lahan appeared unconcerned as he scanned her numbers. "Hmm. Maomao, think you could be so kind as to explain this figure here to your older brother?" She pointedly ignored him—so he whispered in her ear, "I brought your reward from last time. The one I mentioned? I guess maybe you forgot about it."

Maomao's eyes flitted to Yao and En'en. Yao appeared not to have noticed; En'en had, but she was pretending she hadn't. Lahan was referring to Maomao's investigation of the Shaohnese shrine maiden—which she had conducted without the knowledge of the other two women. She'd assumed the matter had been lost in the shuffle surrounding the attempted poisoning of the shrine maiden, but it seemed Lahan had remembered.

Maomao finally stopped working. "We've done about three hundred of them. I measured the length of their legs and wings, and recorded their color and weight, as well as how many eggs the females are carrying. I think these grasshoppers flew in from quite a ways away."

Lahan made noises of acknowledgment, flipping through the papers. What was he thinking? The collection of measurements might seem meaningless to ordinary people, but to this man, nothing was more interesting than numbers.

Yao was still openly dismayed about the entire thing, but she finally noticed Lahan and did her best to say hello in spite of her fatigue. Maomao, thinking that this might be a good time for a quick break, was about to make some tea, but then she realized that maybe it would be cruel to offer Yao something to drink at this particular moment.

"Here you are." En'en placed a cup of tea in front of Lahan, and Lahan alone. He sipped it, so absorbed in the numbers that the mountain of dead grasshoppers didn't even bother him.

"Maomao, what are these figures here?" he asked, pointing to a group that was off on its own.

"Those are the values for our local grasshoppers. They're green rather than brown. I separated them from the ones that flew in from elsewhere based on their color, form, and weight."

During a plague of grasshoppers, the insects themselves could experience physiological changes. The ones that had developed short wings were the ones that had flown from afar.

“Fair enough. How far do you think these could fly, if they were to do so?”

Maomao didn’t answer. She was no specialist. At that point, Yao entered the conversation, although she looked as puzzled as Maomao felt. “I can’t imagine it could be very far,” she said. “A few *li* at most. I mean, they’re just *bugs*.”

Lahan nodded. “Interestingly, there was no other insect damage in the vicinity of the village where the swarm appeared. But to have so many of them—they must have been getting food from somewhere.” Yet not, evidently, the surrounding area. He produced a map from the folds of his robe, an illustration that encompassed the entire country. “You suggested they would only be able to fly a few *li*, yes?”

“Yes—and I think I was being generous,” Yao said.

“However,” Lahan said, and here he took out a piece of string that he laid on top of the map. He must not have wanted to write directly on it, and was using the string instead. He oriented it diagonally from the northwest toward the location of the afflicted village. “This is the direction of the seasonal wind,” he said.

“You think they came in on the breeze,” Maomao said.

“Yes. In which case, they could most likely travel tens of *li* if they wanted.” Next he placed several white Go stones on the map.

“What are the stones for?” Maomao asked, gesturing.

“They represent areas where there was insect damage. I think it’s reasonable to assume that this area is only the latest victim of the swarm as they travel from the northwest.”

“That’s the direction of Hokuaren,” Yao said.

Maomao didn’t say anything; she felt an unpleasant bead of sweat run down her neck. Yao had only stated the fact; she hadn’t seen the implications. Lahan was talking about something more. En’en seemed to see it, but she chose not to say anything; she only watched her mistress fondly.

Lahan bundled up the papers with Maomao’s numbers. “I think we’ve got enough here. Someone else should be able to handle the work after this, yes?”

“I wish you would have let someone else handle it *before* this,” Maomao grumbled.

Lahan shook a reproving finger at her. “I’m not the one who ordered this grasshopper investigation. I was only asked to see if the numbers were good. I may not look it, but I’m a busy man.” He tried to sound indignant, but it was hard to take him seriously given that he was fiddling with the Go stones while he spoke. As for what he was so busy with, the stones in his hand told the story: he

was occupied with a side job. “If the numbers aren’t accurate, then what might otherwise be seen is obscured. We had to make sure we started with good measurements.”

Maomao understood what he was trying to say. He probably already had perfectly good numbers. As he made to leave, however, she grabbed his sleeve. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Oh! Yes, of course.” Lahan theatrically produced a package, inside of which was a root vegetable. Maomao couldn’t help it; she felt the breath start to come hot in her nostrils. “I’ll show myself out, then,” Lahan said. Maomao had gotten what she wanted; she had no more business with him.

“What’s that? Ginseng?” Yao asked, peering at it.

En’en seemed to know the vegetable’s secret. “Yes, it is, but...”

As for Maomao, all she could do was stare intensely at her prize. She couldn’t have looked away from it if she’d wanted to. It was irresistible to her, beautiful. She began to laugh: “Hee hee hee hee hee!”

“Uh... Are you okay?” Yao asked.

“Haaah hee hee hee hee hee hee hee!” was her only answer.

“En’en, I think there’s something wrong with Maomao...”

“You’re just now noticing, milady?”

As far as Maomao was concerned, they may as well not have been talking. Everything else at that moment seemed trivial compared to her ginseng.

“Hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee!”

“There’s something going on here, I know it! That thing he gave her is some kind of awful drug, isn’t it?”

“It’s all right, young mistress. Yes, it’s a drug, but there’s nothing awful about it.”

Maomao held up the ginseng triumphantly and spun around. “Ginseng!”

Ginseng. Indeed. But this wasn’t just ginseng. This was *medicinal* ginseng. People had never succeeded in domesticating it; the only thing one could do was to search for it in nature. It sometimes went by the name of *bangchui*: boiled without peeling, it had become “red ginseng.” Such a large one was quite a rich gift.

For the first time in a long while Maomao danced her happy dance, in a room full of dead bugs, while Yao (increasingly concerned) and En’en (unworried) looked on.

Chapter 9: Jinshi's Idea

Question: What do you do when you have too much work and it's becoming a problem?

Answer: You get other people to do it.

Obvious. Simple. But difficult to implement. Nonetheless, Maamei had been industrious on Jinshi's behalf, and when he got back from his trip, he found much less work piled up than he had feared. Maamei's solution had been quite elegant: as Jinshi's title was always supposed to be chiefly honorary, she'd simply sent all the various jobs, chores, and sundry tasks back to the departments that had foisted them on him in the first place.

Including the issue of the bugs.

"Let the Director of Waters or the Master of Agriculture deal with it" was her assessment. The former was in charge of flood control, while the latter oversaw both currency and cereals. Jinshi had tried passing the matter off to them before, but they'd each rebuffed him with a "It's not our job. We're busy people, sorry."

He tried to explain as much to Maamei, but she was having none of it. "They said *what*? Just push right back! You outrank them, Master Jinshi, even if it is only honorary. What—you're young, so you're going to *see what they think* or something? Are you worried about *hurting their feelings*? Let them use one of those good old boys, the ones who wander in at noon, sip some tea, and go home again. If they say they're busy, that they don't have a free hand? I guarantee it's only because their hands are too full grabbing the women in the pleasure district all night long. Go find them in their brothels and give the work to them right there. I guarantee the departments are full of those people."

There was no besting Maamei in a verbal exchange. Basen and Baryou both looked like they wanted to interject, but they dared not contradict their sister.

Maamei was a highly capable woman, but she was just that—a woman. Thanks to her gender, no one was willing to give her any official jobs. But if Basen was a one on the getting-work-done scale, and Baryou was a five, Maamei ranked a solid three. People didn't know what they were missing. She didn't get as much done as Baryou, but when she was present to act as his assistant, she served as a force multiplier, making him two or three times more

effective. If she'd been a man, she would almost certainly have been Jinshi's aide. But given what an able talker she was, it was perhaps for the best that she was a woman.

"I also have a warning for you, Master Jinshi, considering that you're getting tunnel vision," she added.

"Y-Yes? What's that?" He trembled a little in spite of himself.

"*Ordinary* people would consider a delivery of a mountain of dead bugs to be nothing short of harassment. Especially when that delivery goes to a young woman."

That left Jinshi speechless. He could only slump his shoulders and slap himself on the forehead.

"Parcel out the work," Maamei said. "Make use of anyone you can. And anyone you can't, give them something indifferent to do, just to keep them out of the way." With that, she chased Jinshi out of his office, with orders to use his influence—or his *charms*, if necessary—to get the papers off his desk.

She insisted that people would sing a different tune if he came in person, but he wasn't thrilled about the idea. People were apt to impute a great deal of meaning to his appearing at their door. Back when he'd been a "eunuch" at the rear palace, he would have been more than happy to make use of Maamei's strategy, but as the Imperial younger brother, he hesitated. Still, it was better than having no way to get anywhere, so he went.

"My *charms*, indeed," he grumbled.

"I must apologize for my sister," said Basen, who was accompanying him as his guard. (Jinshi wasn't the only one who found he could hardly look Maamei in the eye.) Then, looking around, he added, "I must say, though, there's some truth to what she says. Look at all the people who don't even bother to do their work."

Many of them hurried to hide something as Jinshi approached.

People leaned against railings reading the Go book. They played games of Go on their breaks, surrounded by other bureaucrats watching them. Some of them scurried to at least pretend they weren't playing when they saw Jinshi, and others averted their eyes, but there were some who were so absorbed in their games that they didn't even notice him. He found himself agreeing with Maamei: they needed to do their blasted work. He was starting to feel silly for having worked himself sleepless all this time. "I knew it was popular, but I think this might be getting out of hand," he said.

“Master Jinshi, I’m not so sure about allowing this sort of thing here,” Basen said. He was looking at a notice board that was normally reserved for imperial edicts.

“Well, we did change the location,” Jinshi said. Basen was looking at the newly reprinted leaflet about the Go tournament. Jinshi’s personal involvement had been taken as an excellent opportunity to advertise the competition far and wide. “Tournament or no, though, these people all seem a bit...*too* eager about this game, don’t you think?” Jinshi said.

The answer to his question could be found right on the leaflet. “It appears there’s a price of ten silver pieces to challenge Grand Commandant Kan,” Basen said, puzzled. He let his fingers brush the words.

Jinshi had thought the entry fee of ten copper pieces was a reasonable and decent thing to do—but *here* was where the enterprising impulse came out. Jinshi was sure he could sense the presence of the eccentric strategist’s nephew somewhere behind the scenes. Lakan could never have orchestrated an event like this all by himself; it had to be largely Lahan’s doing.

“He’s got another book coming out too,” Basen observed. “A collection of Go problems, limited to five hundred copies. You think it’ll sell?”

“They clearly believe it will.”

How far did they plan to push this? Then again, Jinshi reflected, Lahan might have considered this the minimum necessary to make the whole project viable. A year ago, the “fox strategist” had bought out a courtesan’s contract at a price high enough to build a decent villa—and he still hadn’t paid for the wall of the rear palace that he’d damaged either.

“Ten silver pieces for a single game of Go, though. Doesn’t that seem a little expensive?” Basen asked. A commoner could live comfortably for a month on that sum. Jinshi, who had been learning to sharpen his money sense at Maomao’s and Gaoshun’s insistence, understood that it was not a small amount.

Nonetheless, he replied, “I dare say it’s something of a bargain.”

“A bargain, sir? I can’t imagine that.”

Basen was right—if the game were merely about learning at the Commandant’s hands. “What if you beat Grand Commandant Kan? You’d practically be *making* money,” Jinshi said. Basen caught his breath. What a way to gild your reputation! “This says the challenger takes the black stones, and the game will be played with no *komi*.”

In Go, the player with the black stones went first, giving them an advantage. To make things more fair, the white player was typically given a number of

points, known as komi, to compensate.

"You know, I do feel like the Grand Commandant is relatively more respectful toward people who are good at Go," Basen said.

"I suspect because if he were too dismissive of them, he'd soon run out of people to play with." In any event, *relatively* was the operative term.

"If you were to beat him, Master Jinshi, maybe he'd stop coming to your office just to make a scene. Don't you worry he'll go back to his usual 'workload' once the tournament is over?"

Jinshi had induced Lakan to do some of his actual work in exchange for a place to hold the tournament, and Basen feared that when everything was done, Lakan might do something to retaliate. Yet against the strategist, Jinshi suspected that even the black stones wouldn't help him much. That fox was a far better player than even your average professional.

Still... It might be worth a try.

"Ten silver pieces," Jinshi mused. That wasn't so expensive at all.

Jinshi still savored the simple feeling of being able to go home before sunset. He would have to make sure to thank Maamei.

"If you'll excuse me, then, sir," Basen said. He was going back to his own home. Someone else would take night guard duty. Basen had pushed to be allowed to stay at Jinshi's residence and be on call, but to be quite frank, Jinshi thought it would be draining to be attended by Basen all day, every day, and politely declined.

Suiren greeted him as he reached his pavilion. "You'll be wanting a meal," she said with a smile.

"No, I'd prefer to bathe first," Jinshi said, but then he stopped. Something in the air seemed different. His favorite incense was burning, but it smelled sweeter than normal. And the guards inside weren't ones he recognized. "A visitor?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

There were only so many people who might drop in at Jinshi's residence. Jinshi went to the living area, the guards in the hallway bowing as he passed by. There, he found exactly who he expected lounging and waiting for him.

"Are you not needed at the rear palace tonight, sire?" Jinshi asked as he bowed to the Emperor.

"These days, the overseer keeps trying to foist all these new consorts on me," His Majesty replied. He had a drink (which he was sipping) in one hand, a book

(which he was reading) in the other, and extraordinary facial hair. A Go board sat before him. So—another one on the bandwagon. “It’s all about which girls he *thinks* will meet my tastes.”

Meaning well-endowed ones, no doubt. But the leader of the entire country wasn’t choosing his bedfellows based purely on bust size. A particular consort might match his preferences, but she could still turn out to be politically disastrous—that seemed to be the gist of His Majesty’s complaint. But it wasn’t the only thing on his mind. There was his newly chosen Empress, Gyokuyou, as well. Her father Gyokuen was currently in the capital. It remained unclear whether he would go back to the west from whence he’d come, or if he would remain as a prominent citizen of this city, but the latter seemed more likely.

“Uneasy with your father-in-law around?” Jinshi asked. This was his residence; he could get away with being a touch flippant.

“Throughout history, the one who wears the crown has always had to be alert to the feelings of those around him.” The Emperor placed a stone on the board with a click, then gestured at the empty chair across from him, urging Jinshi to sit.

Jinshi sat down, smiling at His Majesty. The Go bowl beside him was full of white stones.

“Gyokuyou has it no easier than I do, though. If I have to watch out for my father-in-law, she’s got to think about her mother-in-law each and every day.” Gyokuyou had left the rear palace and was now situated near the Empress Dowager’s residence. For the new Empress, it was probably an even more tedious existence than life in the rear palace had been. “Speaking of which. When I went to visit her the other day, she asked a favor of me.”

“What’s that?”

“Considering the...vulnerability of her new position, she wants a food taster. She mentioned how pleased she would be if it were someone she already knew.”

Jinshi resisted the impulse to frown. “And what will you do about the girl?”

“Heavens. Which girl?”

Jinshi didn’t rise to the bait. The Emperor shook his book at Jinshi, patently enjoying himself. Jinshi was sure His Majesty was teasing him. Like Gyokuyou, he had a playful side.

The Emperor said, “I would have considered her, if she’d been of less *distinguished* stock.” He set down his book—which, needless to say, was the one by the freak strategist.

Lakan aligned himself with no faction within the court, yet neither did he

form some group of his own. It was considered common sense in the palace that one left him alone unless absolutely necessary. He'd always been single and had even taken an adopted son, so no one had imagined he had a child of his own. Lakan, for his part, said that he hadn't been trying to hide her; people had simply, and quite on their own, misunderstood his behavior.

Even before Maomao had entered the rear palace, Jinshi was given to understand, the madam of the brothel would meet Lakan with a bucket of cold water when he raced up exclaiming, "Daddy's here!" Most people thought he went there to see a favored courtesan and was just an abrasive old fart who wasn't allowed inside anymore.

On some level, it was sort of incredible. Only when he smashed through the walls of the rear palace, and later when he started dropping in on (and disrupting work at) the medical office on a regular basis, did people begin to consider: *Oh, he has a daughter?* Though Maomao resolutely refused to acknowledge it, what she chose to do in the palace could impact the very power structures of the court. Gyokuen was already letting the situation run away with him. If Lakan's daughter became the Empress's handmaiden, it would not make matters better.

"I'm going to give Gyokuen a clan name. His position will rise. I would hate to throw any *more* fuel on the fire." Even as he claimed to be cowed by his father-in-law, the Emperor was planning ahead. These were not thoughts he would voice to anyone else; he could almost have been talking to himself.

Suiren brought Jinshi a drink in a vessel of clear glass. The bloodred liquid looked lovely in the translucent drinkware.

"This wine is quite acidic," said the Emperor, who already had a glass beside him.

"It's how I prefer my wine," Jinshi replied.

"I'm not saying I don't like it. But I'm told sweeter wines have been all the rage lately."

At the words "sweeter wines," an image of Maomao scowling drifted through Jinshi's mind.

"Something the matter?" the Emperor asked.

"No, nothing." Jinshi realized he was in serious danger of smiling and quickly quashed the expression.

The Emperor gave him a curious look, but simply swirled his glass. "The sudden passion for Go has a way of making us forget, but there are quite a few foreign goods making their way through the markets."

"Yes, sir." Jinshi was aware of that. A wide variety of imported products had

arrived from the west along with the shrine maiden. It probably helped that they had temporarily relaxed taxes again.

"Do you know what the most popular of them is?"

"I'm afraid I don't, sir."

The Emperor grinned. He could never act so relaxed while performing his official duties, and he seemed to make up for it whenever he was alone with Jinshi. "Grape wine."

"Grape wine?" Jinshi cocked his head. "You don't mean the stuff from the western capital?" The area around Gyokuyou's hometown was a rich land for grapes—in fact, the wine they were drinking at that moment came from the region.

"The wine from the western capital has that unique astringency. But this new stuff is sweeter. Quite good, I've heard."

"Is it really of such high quality?" Jinshi took a sip of his drink. The wine from the western capital was bitter, yes, but that wasn't a sign of low quality. He also knew that it *should* have been sweeter: the wine he'd had in the western capital itself had almost tasted like it had honey in it.

The subject of the wine brought something back to him, a memory. When had it been? Around the time Maomao had entered his personal service after leaving the rear palace. He swirled his drink. "Do you believe it's really foreign-made?" he asked.

"I haven't drunk it yet myself, but my advisors tell me it's divine."

"It might be best you not try it." Jinshi glanced at Suiren, and when she came over to him, he whispered something to her. She was a very talented lady-in-waiting and understood what he wanted right away. She left the room and came back with a package.

"What's this?" the Emperor asked, stroking his beard.

Jinshi showed him what was inside: a metal cup. "I received it as a gift. Sometime last year." His thoughts took him back to the previous spring.

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"I think perhaps you'd better not drink the wine, sir," the taciturn young apothecary said as she cleaned up the servingware. Jinshi had just poured himself an after-dinner drink.

"Why's that? I saw you check it for poison." He swirled the liquid in the cup.

The apothecary had recently left the rear palace to return to the pleasure

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district—though Jinshi had subsequently hired her on as his lady-in-waiting and food tester, sealing the deal with the offer of an excellent salary.

"Yes, sir, I did. There was no poison in it, as far as I could tell. But if you want my opinion, I think it's rather acidic."

"That's perfect, then." Jinshi, in fact, liked wines that were somewhat sour or acidic over those that were simply sweet. Suiren must have prepared a drink in accordance with his preferences—and this wine had come all the way from the western capital.

"The problem is with your cup, sir."

"My cup?" He looked at the metal vessel he was holding. "You think *it* might be poisoned?"

"No."

"Then what?"

The apothecary plucked the drink from his hand. "If you'll pardon me." She dipped a chopstick in the wine and put just a drop of the stuff in her mouth. She spent a long moment tasting it, then she left the room. To spit out the wine and wash out her mouth, Jinshi assumed.

She returned shortly with the bottle of wine. "Now it's poisonous," she said.

"What do you mean, *now* it is?"

"It's noticeably sweeter than it was when I sampled it," she replied. "If you let it sit a little longer, it would probably get sweeter still."

"I don't know what you mean by that, but may I take a guess at what's going on?"

"Please do," the apothecary said with a nod. Her expression remained impassive.

"I assume the wine isn't toxic by itself—but combine it with something else and it becomes so."

The slightest of smiles came over the apothecary's face. It seemed he was right. "Metal tends to dissolve when exposed to highly acidic things. I suspect this cup is made of lead—and when you mix lead into sour wine, it makes it sweeter, or so I've heard. They even say that in the west, lead is sometimes mixed into wine deliberately as a sweetener." And people who drank it frequently got very sick. "Ultimately, I can only offer you my father's opinion, but he felt strongly that the lead was likely to be behind the cases of poisoning." Her father being the former medical officer of the rear palace and a gifted physician. He'd even studied in the west at one point.

Jinshi set down the lead cup without a word.

“I’m not certain you would develop acute poisoning symptoms by drinking from that cup once or twice, but if you used it consistently it could be dangerous.” The apothecary was hedging her bets; she didn’t like to speak out of speculation.

“If the poison *were* to have an effect, what kind of symptoms would I see?” Jinshi asked.

The apothecary thought for a second. “Do you remember the toxic whitening powder from the rear palace?”

“Of course. How could I forget?”

“I’ve heard tell that it contained a mixture of lead and vinegar.”

In other words, Jinshi would develop symptoms much like those who had been poisoned by the toxic powder. He nodded his understanding.

“You might wish to investigate the drinking habits of whoever taught you how to drink wine,” she said. If they used a lead cup themselves, then they had most likely given the same thing to Jinshi in good faith. Otherwise, however, there was the possibility of foul play.

It wouldn’t be the first time someone had made an attempt on Jinshi’s life. He would need to look into the person behind this cup, and what they had been thinking when they gave it to him.

“May I add something else, sir?”

“Yes?”

The apothecary regarded the wine still in the bottle. “You seem to think this wine is bitter on purpose, because the land made it so.” She gave the bottle a gentle shake. “But I think it’s begun to turn to vinegar because of the long journey to get here.”

He was quiet. She was saying that the wine he’d been drinking so fondly was actually stuff that had gone bad.

“I think with more careful consideration of transport methods, it’s possible the wine could get here without its character changing so drastically.” After all, the western capital was far away, and the journey was long and hot.

“Strange, then, that it tastes good to me,” Jinshi said, puzzled.

Maomao’s expression hardened. “Fatigue dulls the sense of taste, making you less sensitive to bitterness...”

Jinshi didn’t say anything.

“Also, I prefer drier alcohols, myself.”

Nothing like having your food taster make implicit demands. Unfortunately for her, Jinshi had *always* preferred sour flavors. Or at least, so he told himself.

“I think I’m going to stick to grape wine for a while,” he said.

“Very good, young master,” Suiren said obligingly, earning a scowl from the apothecary.

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“Well! I hadn’t heard that story before,” the Emperor said, draining his cup. Some baked treats Suiren had prepared sat beside him. “So you’re saying the wine that’s been so popular recently is...”

“Technically ruined, or perhaps fake.”

This alcohol came from a foreign country—the journey would certainly be longer than that from the western capital. It would be hard to preserve the wine completely unchanged, and given that enough of it had been imported to flood the city markets, some of the bottles were almost certainly bad. It needed to be made sweet in order to sell—which implied that the wine making the rounds of the city was poisonous.

Alternatively, someone could have been making wine locally and passing it off as imported stuff, in which case they were committing fraud. Imports involved substantial taxes, and even with the customs burden light, there were still transport costs to consider—and scarcity value. Imported wine commanded much higher prices than that made in the western capital.

There was always a chance that a few decent, untainted bottles had made it all this way, but it wasn’t the most likely scenario.

“The same poison as the face powder,” His Majesty said thoughtfully, swishing his drink and stroking his beard. “Speaking of which, I understand that after banning the stuff in the rear palace, you went on to prohibit it from sale in the marketplaces, yes?”

“Yes, sir. It seemed the most appropriate course of action.”

“Supposing the former ingredients of that powder became the sweeteners for this wine?”

Jinshi caught his breath, his eyes going wide. How could he not have realized? It made so much sense. “I’ll launch a thorough investigation,” he said. He put down his cup and took a bite of one of the baked treats to calm himself. These treats were distinguished by their soft dough; inside, they contained dried fruit. They smelled faintly of alcohol. Each bite was comfortingly warm and sweet. Suiren must have known the Emperor was coming. She’d been his nursemaid as well as Jinshi’s, and she must have wanted to give him some

special treats to enjoy.

"Suiren's baking is always wonderful, no matter how often I eat it," the Emperor said, clearly pleased. He was stuffing one of the treats into his face; no sooner was it in his mouth than he was washing it down with his (freshly filled) cup of wine. He brushed a hand through his beard to get the crumbs out, then picked up a black Go stone with his free hand. "I don't think we've played Go since before you entered the rear palace," he said, fondly returning the stone to its bowl.

The former emperor had passed away when Jinshi was thirteen, and Jinshi had become crown prince. That same year, he challenged the Emperor to a game of Go, and when he won, he earned the right to enter the rear palace as the "eunuch," Jinshi. All so that he could abandon his position as crown prince.

"Ever since then, I've held that a man shouldn't bet on a game of Go," the Emperor said.

"I'm afraid you can't take it back now."

"I told you, if you wish to be Emperor, I'll happily give you the title when the time comes." He still hadn't fulfilled his end of the bargain with Jinshi.

"I *don't* wish it." He hadn't even wanted to be crown prince. But at the time, His Majesty had had no children, and the former emperor's other offspring had perished long before. He'd been forced to make his own new substitute.

"I've never regretted losing a game so much as I did that day," the Emperor said.

"Oh, I doubt that's true."

Empress Gyokuyou had a son, the Crown Prince, and she'd also given His Majesty a daughter whom he doted on. Consort Lihua had a son as well. What would be the point of restoring Jinshi to the princehood now? Even if there were some reason to do so, it would certainly cause sparks to fly.

The autumn garden party was approaching, when it was expected that Gyokuen would finally be introduced with his new name. If it hadn't been for the trouble with the Shaohnese shrine maiden, the Emperor would have done it already. He couldn't afford to anger his father-in-law any further—and Jinshi couldn't afford to upset the grandfather of the next emperor.

He didn't want to become the reason for a civil war; yet he also needed to avoid the sparks that were already flying. As it stood, Jinshi had so much to do, and not enough means by which to do it. He needed more power.

"Perhaps I might make one request of Your Majesty?"

"You're not dreaming up another harebrained scheme, are you? I'm warning

you, no more wagers."

"It's a small thing," he replied, taking the bowl of black stones. Or trying to —the Emperor seemed to wish to play black as well, and wouldn't let it go. "If I win, I'd like you to lend me your Go tutor, the Sage, for a little while."

Giving Jinshi a questioning look, the Emperor let go of the bowl.

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Chapter 10: Baitang

The aroma of medicine drifted through the room. Maomao gazed at her creation, pleased to have been able to put it together right in her own chambers in just the few minutes since she'd gotten back from work. Now she would finally be able to do some experiments.

I think this should do it. Her invention included two types of herbs: some to prevent anything poisonous from getting into a wound, and some to revitalize the body. She'd mixed them together, added oil to prevent them from drying out, and finally added a bit of beeswax to produce a balm. She nodded in satisfaction as she rolled up her left sleeve and readied her knife. She wiped it with alcohol to make sure it was clean, then flourished the blade and—

"Eeeek!" someone cried. It was Yao. "Maomao, what are you doing?!"

"I'm not sure I understand the question." She set down the knife, a fresh cut visible on her left arm. She'd just been trying out a new medicine in her room. Par for the course for Maomao, but it must have been an unnerving sight to Yao. "Don't worry," she said. "I've got medicine right here."

She didn't mention that the whole question was whether or not it was going to work. Trial and error, that was the way forward when developing new cures.

I admit it would be nice if there were someone else I could test things on, she thought. She could practically see her father's frown, though. Once in a while she managed to use one of her concoctions on a sturdy-looking soldier, but with a few precious exceptions, they didn't come back after she had helped them. *What they need is a good, violent training accident*, she thought. Not very nice, true. People got angry when she tried to keep mice, and once when she'd had the bright idea of shaving Maomao the cat in order to test a hair-growth potion, the dismay from the other inhabitants of the Verdigris House had been so intense and vociferous that she'd had no choice but to give up on her plan. (It wasn't like she was going to waste the shaven fur! She would have turned it into writing brushes!)

For all these reasons, then, Maomao's only option was to experiment on her own body.

And now Yao was all upset. "You big, dumb dummy!" she said.

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“What’s the matter?” En’en asked, drawn by Yao’s shouting. She was greeted by the sight of Yao holding Maomao’s left arm and looking very unhappy.

“*Say* something to her, En’en!” Yao exclaimed.

“About what?” En’en must have been in the middle of making dinner, because she was holding some bok choy. Perhaps some sort of soup was in store for them. En’en made a rich, delicious baitang soup by boiling fish and pork bones. Maomao resolved to help herself to some later.

“About *this*! Just look at this arm!” Yao gestured with Maomao’s left arm.

“I see it. I would guess she’s testing the effects of medicines.”

“Is that true?” Yao demanded.

“It is,” confirmed Maomao. En’en had sharp eyes; she’d probably guessed what Maomao was doing even though she’d never actually seen it.

“If you knew about this, why didn’t you stop her?” Yao asked. “I *thought* your arm never seemed to get any better. It’s because you’ve been giving it fresh injuries!” Maomao had noticed Yao never commented on her bandage. It turned out it wasn’t because she hadn’t noticed it; she’d been trying to be sensitive and not mention it.

“Mistress, this is something Maomao’s doing purposefully. It’s not simple self-harm; she’s trying to develop effective pharmaceuticals. I didn’t think there was any reason to stop her.”

“She’s right. I have an objective in mind,” Maomao said. “Medicine and poison are two sides of the same coin. You have to balance your formula so that it becomes one and not the other—but the only way to know what you have is to try it.”

Any student of medicine ought to have understood the importance of experimentation. The medical office even kept several kinds of domestic animals on hand for the purpose of testing medicines—a fact that always caused Yao to look very conflicted, though in the end she never said anything about it. She knew it was necessary.

Maomao thought this was similar—not something Yao really had any right to argue about—but Yao, scowling, wasn’t about to back down. “I don’t care. That’s no excuse to go on like this!” She wouldn’t let go of Maomao’s arm. “Friends don’t let friends do...*this* to themselves!”

Maomao and En’en both looked at her wide-eyed. “Friends. Right,” En’en said. “*Friends* wouldn’t... I suppose...” She looked at Maomao with a hint of jealousy.

“Right... Friends...” Maomao echoed. Come to think of it, she’d been spending a fair amount of time with them outside work recently—sharing meals, going out together, or just chatting. Those *were* things that could arguably be classified as activities one did with friends.

As first En’en and then Maomao tried out the idea out loud, Yao’s face got redder and redder. “Th-That was a slip of the tongue! I meant colleagues! *Work* colleagues! Anyone would stop their professional counterparts from doing awful medical experiments on themselves. Wouldn’t they, En’en?”

En’en paused a second to think about it. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t think it would help to try to stop Maomao, and anyway, if it’s serving a higher purpose, maybe we should let her do what she wants.”

Maomao nodded.

“All right! Well, I can do the same thing!” Yao said.

“You most certainly cannot!” En’en burst out, dropping her bok choy. “I won’t brook a single scratch on your beautiful, flawless skin, Lady Yao! It can’t be allowed! I dare not think of it! If you did any such thing, I would make ten times—no, a hundred times—as many wounds on my own body! Could you live with that, milady?!”

En’en had Yao by the shoulders and was shaking her. She looked very serious and was talking very fast, working herself into a frenzy. Maomao couldn’t help thinking it didn’t seem like a very delicate way to handle one’s “mistress,” but she figured En’en couldn’t stop herself. The more you cared for someone, the more you wanted a say in how they behaved—especially if that behavior involved hurting themselves.

Yao had finally freed Maomao’s arm, so she dabbed some medicine on it and rewrapped the bandage. Then she picked up the bok choy En’en had dropped. “Say... Do you smell something burning?” she asked, sniffing the air.

“I left the stewpot on the fire,” En’en said.

There was a short pause—and then all three of them raced to the kitchen.

The pork buns En’en had been making were burned to a crisp. She’d prepared a multiple of three, which made Maomao think (or at least hope) that En’en had been including her, but it was impossible to work up any desire to eat the blackened food.

“I’ll clean up later,” En’en said, deflated. She seemed less upset about wasting food than the prospect of having to scrape up the charred bits.

That’s going to be a chore, all right, Maomao thought.

Congee and soup made for a somewhat simpler meal than usual, but En'en's baitang was exquisite, as Maomao reaffirmed to herself with every sip. She'd asked for the recipe once, but En'en wouldn't tell her—she'd only looked at Yao and grinned. Maomao had decided it seemed wise not to press the subject.

I do wonder what's in it, though. Unlike Yao, Maomao didn't mind lowbrow ingredients, so it didn't really matter to her what was involved.

Yao looked somewhat disappointed by the dearth of side dishes, but she thoughtfully held her tongue when she saw how despondent En'en already was. As mistress-servant relationships went, this one was highly functional—in Maomao's view, because Yao was the object of En-en's intense, if not necessarily requited, affections.

She picked up a scallop with her chopsticks and popped it into her mouth. It was still full of flavor. "By the way, Yao, did you want something with me?" she asked. The entire chain of events that had led to the burned food had, after all, begun with Yao coming to Maomao's room. She was too timid to visit Maomao without a good reason, or at least a good excuse.

"Oh yeah, I forgot," Yao said, setting down her chopsticks, which still had some pork between them. She took a piece of paper from the folds of her robes. "I've got a schedule here."

"What kind of schedule?"

The physicians from the medical office often had to be on-site when there was a festival or ritual occasion, so each month the office produced a schedule showing if and when any doctors would be required for anything. As Yao unfolded the paper, Maomao saw two very familiar words:

"A garden party!"

Indeed. The bane of all the consorts in the rear palace in these days when winter was approaching.

"It looks like it's mainly that and the end-of-year observances," En'en said, peeking over their shoulders.

"But isn't it a little late for a garden party?" Maomao asked. She felt like the year before, the party had taken place at least a month earlier. There wouldn't be any flowers left to admire in the garden by now.

"It is," En'en confirmed. "But if I had to guess, I would say this party is just a cover." Her fingers brushed the words on the page. She always seemed very in-the-know about what was going on. "I think it's a chance for them to present the new 'name-holder.' The one they've kept putting off."

"You mean the 'Jade'?"

The jade, that was to say, *gyoku*: as in Gyokuen, father of Empress Gyokuyou. It was now more than six months since he had been summoned to the capital from his usual abode in Li's western reaches. Normally, he would have been formally presented immediately, but it had been delayed by the attempted poisoning of Shaoh's shrine maiden.

Yao and En'en both looked a shade uneasy. They didn't know that the shrine maiden was still alive. At least, En'en certainly didn't. Perhaps Yao suspected something, but if the Yao-crazed En'en had known, there was no telling what she might do.

"They've started conscripting soldiers again out west. Being close to the border as they are, the western capital tends to do what it wants, without any input from the palace. Although maybe having Master Gyokuen out there will help the situation a little."

Where does *she get this information?* Maomao wondered. She was continually surprised at how much En'en seemed to know.

"Conscripting?" Yao asked.

"Yes, mistress. If the central authority would go ahead and just expand the military, everything might be fine, but the government's been slow to act. Supposedly, they want to wait until after the martial service exams next year."

Is someone expecting an attack from one of our neighbors? If so, it would make sense to start levying troops, even here in the central regions—but if there was no present threat, then perhaps there was something holding the government back. In any case, it wasn't for a medical assistant like Maomao to question.

"En'en, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, mistress?"

"Can we trust those people from the west?"

Maomao took a quick look around: her question was a little too blunt. But there was no one else in the dining hall, and the doors and windows were all shut against the cold. She doubted anyone had heard them.

"Young mistress..." En'en said. But Yao replied, "I know. That's why I'm asking here." Yao was many things, but she was not stupid. She'd waited until the three of them were alone.

"I've heard about Empress Gyokuyou," Yao went on. "People say she never has her nose in the air, even though she's so beautiful. That she was kind and considerate even to her servants in the rear palace. I guess you'd know more about that than I do, Maomao."

"Empress Gyokuyou certainly isn't the type to bring a country to its knees

with her demands. His Majesty isn't the kind to let a woman completely wrap him around her little finger, anyway." Then Maomao, realizing that she'd gone a little too far, added, "...is, ahem, what I heard from the rear-palace physician." The quack would have to take the fall for this one.

Yao and En'en knew Maomao had worked in the rear palace, but they didn't know that she'd been at the Jade Pavilion. Then again, maybe En'en did, but recognized that Maomao's life would be easier if she didn't mention it. If either of them asked, Maomao would be willing to talk about it, but until then, she saw no need to bring it up.

"Not the kind to bring the country to its knees," Yao said thoughtfully, taking a spoonful of congee. "I know some women of the past have been accused of that sort of thing, but I wonder if they were really all so bad." She let the congee slide back off the spoon.

Maomao saw what she was getting at. "No matter how upstanding Empress Gyokuyou might be, I wouldn't know about her family." For example, Maomao knew almost nothing about the man called Gyokuen. And the marshaling of troops in the western capital could be a frightening prospect, depending on what you thought it was for. Given what had recently happened to the rebellious Shi clan, Maomao wanted to think they wouldn't do anything so stupid—but the possibility was always there.

Yao had an impulsive streak, but she proved strikingly perceptive at times. "I agree," she said. "I dearly hope Empress Gyokuyou is more than just a very refined tool."

"Lady Yao," En'en said, worried now. Yao was her own uncle's pawn. What if she believed Empress Gyokuyou had assumed the highest position in the nation simply in order to help her family advance in power and glory? What would she think of the Empress then?

Yao took another spoonful of congee, and this time it made it to her mouth.

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Chapter 11: Sport and Fear

With just a few days to go until the garden party, Empress Gyokuyou was coordinating her clothing with her ladies-in-waiting.

“Are you sure this isn’t a bit too plain, Lady Gyokuyou?” Yinghua asked. She was busy trying to match an accessory to her outfit. The women were wearing red, just as they always had, but it was of a darker shade than when Gyokuyou had been only a consort. “Wouldn’t it be better to...stand out?”

“It’ll be perfect for the colors of the banquet itself,” replied Hongniang, the chief lady-in-waiting, who was running a comb through her mistress’s hair. “And it matches what His Majesty will be wearing. That’s especially important.”

Despite her assured response, Hongniang looked somewhat out of sorts herself; she set down the comb and went to the wardrobe. Yinghua added another hair stick to the one she already had. Before, when they’d been in the rear palace, the only question had been how to outshine the other consorts, and the ladies-in-waiting had devised ways to have fun while staying within the bounds of good taste—and good sense. Now, however, they were in a different position.

“Are you sure that will work, Lady Hongniang?” Yinghua asked, blanching when she saw the hair stick Hongniang had chosen.

“Hmm. You don’t think it’s the right look?”

“I think it looks fine. But we used that one at the last tea party with the Empress Dowager. I guarantee her ladies-in-waiting will notice.”

“Huh. That’s too bad,” Hongniang said, putting the hair stick back. By and large, clothing or accessories once used at a large banquet were not used at such a function again. The loveliest accessories would be refashioned into other forms and relegated to use as fashionable touches at some small tea party. Smaller accessories might be used several times, but it would never do to have people thinking you had only one thing to wear.

“It does look like it could use some decoration, though,” Yinghua said, taking in Gyokuyou’s apparel.

“Yeah...” Hongniang agreed. The two of them made thoughtful noises. Gyokuyou sympathized with them.

“Matching colors are all well and good, but I wish we had something that really jumped out. A big jewel or something,” Yinghua said.

Jade the Empress had in abundance, but it didn’t match this outfit. Something more translucent, something that could suck the viewer in, would be ideal.

“Like crystal,” said Yinghua. “Or one of those polished diamonds from the west!”

“I doubt we could get one of those on such short notice. If we had an unpolished diamond, we could get a craftsman to polish it, but he would have to work fast. Diamonds aren’t easy to work with,” Hongniang said. Diamonds were hard, so hard that only another diamond could scratch them. That made it difficult to do fine work on them. Nonetheless, one did wish to find something appropriate. Hongniang turned back toward the room containing Gyokuyou’s wardrobe. Gyokuyou had always been less given to ostentation than the other consorts, but she was Empress now. Surely she had a crystal or two lying around.

Gyokuyou herself, though, stuck out her tongue playfully and said, “It just doesn’t sound like much *fun*.” She’d had so few things to amuse her since she’d left the rear palace. Yes, spending her days with the children was enjoyable, and the Emperor showed her, his Empress, as much favor as he could—but her most recent request, he had denied.

If only her food taster, Maomao, were here, she might have been able to while away the hours. Gyokuyou was just a bit past twenty years old; her girlish curiosity was still undimmed.

“As long as I’m going to wear something, it might as well be something interesting,” she said, getting up from her chair with a smile. She calmly took out one particular item. The two ladies-in-waiting didn’t notice what she had taken, or from where.

“Hongniang, Yinghua,” Gyokuyou said.

“Yes, milady? Is something the matter?” they said, going to her. She showed them some stones resting on a piece of cloth. Three stones, highly translucent crystals, so clear you could see through them to the other side.

“I didn’t know we had gemstones like this,” Hongniang said, flummoxed. Yinghua, however, looked from Gyokuyou to the crystals and back, her eyes wide. Gyokuyou saw what she was thinking and winked at her, giving her a thumbs-up where Hongniang wouldn’t notice.

The Empress went to her desk and picked up a brush, sketching out a simple picture. “Perhaps we could have them shaped like this,” she said. She’d drawn a

hair stick that looked a bit like a traditional lantern; the crystal would be tucked inside as if into a basket. She handed the crystal and the paper to Yinghua. “Go ask them for that if you would, Yinghua.”

“But Lady Gyokuyou, I always place such orders for you...” Hongniang began to reach for the items, but Gyokuyou stopped her.

“Surely we can give Yinghua something to do once in a while too. I’m sure she understands what I want.”

“I’m sure she does, milady, but... Lady Gyokuyou, what are you planning?”

The Empress didn’t answer immediately. Hongniang was sharp. She wasn’t chief lady-in-waiting for nothing—and she knew how Gyokuyou ticked, having been her minder since the Empress had been a girl. Just as Hongniang knew Gyokuyou, so Gyokuyou knew Hongniang.

“I can’t make you do *all* my chores forever, can I?” the Empress asked. She let her gaze drop to the floor, then fixed Hongniang with a beseeching look.

The other woman’s expression only became firmer. “So long as I am your chief lady-in-waiting, Lady Gyokuyou, I vow I will do my duty.”

“But how will you *ever* get married that way?”

That word, *married*, had the desired effect. Hongniang looked as shocked as if caught by an unexpected clap of thunder. “M-M-Married...” she said. Hongniang was still vivacious and lovely, but she was also well past the average age of marriage. Where most people got married between their mid-teens and early twenties, Hongniang was now thirty years old...plus two. It was such that when they had been in the rear palace, she’d angled to make a match with Gaoshun, even if he was a eunuch. In point of fact, he *wasn’t* a eunuch, but he did have an older, domineering wife of his own already. Upon learning of this, Hongniang had summarily abandoned any interest in him.

“You always want to handle everything yourself. What will I do if you ever leave? I need some of my other ladies to get some experience.”

Hongniang’s excessive competence would also discourage the unfairer sex from approaching her. When Gyokuyou had entered the rear palace at age fourteen, Hongniang had come with her. The rear palace was too much of a den of iniquity for a young woman to make her way on her own; she needed capable attendants. Gyokuyou had been accompanied by several other long-serving women as well, but when she became His Majesty’s bedmate and attempts on her life became a real possibility, and indeed an actual occurrence, her women went home one by one. Some had gotten married, but others had been incapacitated tasting her food.

Finally the only ones left were Hongniang, Yinghua, Guiyuan, and Ailan, and the latter three were young and inexperienced. Gyokuyou could understand why Hongniang felt she had to be in charge of everything.

A nursemaid had been hired, temporarily, upon the birth of Princess Lingli, but Gyokuyou had still taken on no new ladies-in-waiting. Having been raised in a place of blowing sands and never sure who was an enemy and who was a friend, she preferred to continue to keep the company she already had.

Into the middle of all this had come Maomao. Things had been so much fun when she was around. Gyokuyou could have easily gotten lost in the memories, but she knew there was no time to reminisce. Right now, she had to focus all her energies on throwing Hongniang off the scent, if only to continue killing time.

"My father remarked to me that we simply must find some fine prospect for you, Hongniang."

"Master Gyokuen said that?" Hongniang asked, visibly moved.

It wasn't *not* true. Gyokuyou's father had remarked, "If that Hongniang had a child, it would go far in the world, son or daughter." It would be much too late for any such child to be a milk sibling, but it would no doubt serve well.

"I've got more ladies-in-waiting than before," Gyokuyou added. "You don't have to carry *everything* on your shoulders." Upon the birth of the Crown Prince, three more young ladies had come from Gyokuyou's hometown to attend her. "I understand your misgivings. For a woman, this is still a battlefield, even if it's not as bad as the rear palace. None of us knows what might happen. But you're not alone anymore. You need to start thinking about your own future and living for yourself."

Frankly, Gyokuyou impressed even herself with the fluency of this little sermon. With a tongue that quick, she might even survive this women's war.

"Lady Gyokuyou... I had no idea you felt that way about me..." Hongniang's eyes were brimming with tears. "Very well. I'll go call Ailan and Guiyuan. Although I question how many of my duties those girls will actually be able to handle."

Hongniang trundled out of the room, rather suddenly on board with Gyokuyou's thinking. Her cheeks as she went were as bright as a maiden's in the first flush of love.

Left alone in the room, Gyokuyou reached for her writing brush again. She wasn't going to let this be just a simple prank. She would write to her father, who was in the capital now, to ask if he didn't know of any good potential matches.

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“Lady Gyokuyou?”

She was so surprised by Hongniang’s reappearance that she almost dropped her brush. “Yes? Is something the matter?” she asked. She tried to look cool and calm even as she studied Hongniang. The face of her chief lady-in-waiting was suddenly pale, and Koku-u was standing outside, her cheeks equally bloodless.

“This... This is for you,” Hongniang said, and held out a letter. It was folded neatly and sealed with wax. The seal bore an impression of a common poppy, but it was wearing away, a sign of how far the letter had traveled. Gyokuyou knew the insignia at once—would have known who sent the letter, even if it had no name on it.

“It... It’s from my elder brother,” she said. The words that had come so easily a few minutes earlier now felt heavy and difficult. Her older brother was the son of her father’s proper wife. Gyokuyou’s own mother had been a dancing girl performing in the western capital when Gyokuen had spotted her and fallen in love. She bore Gyokuyou sometime thereafter; the Empress got her red hair and jade eyes from her mother.

Gyokuyou and her brother were separated by more than twenty years, closer to niece and uncle than sister and brother. Of familial warmth there was none between them.

“Foreign spawn!”

By the time Gyokuyou had been able to understand the import of those words, she’d already run far away from her brother. Yet from her brother’s children it seemed she could never escape. Naturally the children would imitate their father in his open contempt. What could she do but laugh? She let the corners of her mouth turn up and guffawed no matter what they did to her. Crying would only give them more pleasure, and if she got angry, they would turn around and claim it was she who had been mean to them. She could only laugh off whatever they did.

When her father ordered her to enter the rear palace of the newly ascended Emperor, Gyokuyou saw her chance. A chance to go where her brother and his offspring couldn’t touch her, where there would be all kinds of fun things to enjoy. Yes, she was sad to leave her home, but she also felt much happiness.

Gyokuyou broke the seal on the letter, or at any rate finished what the elements had started. The letter was written in flowing, elegant script, uncharacteristic of her brother.

“What does he say?” Hongniang asked, her face a mask of concern.

Gyokuyou let the corners of her mouth turn up and willed her heart to stop

beating so fast. *Smile*, she told herself. *Laugh.*

"He begins with a perfectly ordinary comment about the weather. At least he knows how to show a modicum of respect." She was sure he'd written it with clenched teeth. She knew how much he despised this daughter of a foreign concubine.

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With their father Gyokuen in the central regions, no doubt Gyokuyou's brother was treating the western capital as his personal fiefdom. There was every chance that Gyokuen would simply remain here, and her brother would take over overseeing their home.

Gyokuyou had several other older brothers as well, but only the eldest showed this desire to rise in the world. Hence why their father had requested someone from the capital as an aide. She'd heard that one of Grand Commandant Kan's men had been sent. When she had first learned that the Grand Commandant was Maomao's father, she was shocked—but, on reflection, maybe not *that* shocked.

As she read her brother's letter, she caught glimpses of a new ambition.

"He says he wishes to send his daughter to the rear palace," she told Hongniang. That would be Gyokuyou's niece. She was said to be sixteen years old, but Gyokuyou didn't recall her brother having any daughters of that age. She must have been the offspring of a concubine, or otherwise some girl he had adopted from somewhere. A small portrait of her was included. What had motivated him to do that?

Gyokuyou regarded it silently for a moment, and then, still without a word, she tore it to pieces. She knew full well that it wasn't the girl's fault that she was being sent to the rear palace—but her brother's intention was transparent, and it disgusted her.

The portrait showed a girl with red hair and green eyes. The marks of a foreign-blooded child. Just the kind her brother hated so much.

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Chapter 12: Bad Cooking

A few meager snowflakes drifted from a leaden sky.

"I thought it was getting colder. Look—it's snowing," said Yao, breathing on fingers red from doing the laundry. If En'en had seen her hands in that state, she would have been ready with the bandages in no time flat.

"And to think, it was clear last night," Maomao said. She thought back to how lovely the stars had looked in the sky. In winter, chill and clarity were intertwined. Her old man had told her it was because without any clouds in the sky, the heat the air accumulated during the day quickly escaped. "The garden party's going to be rough going if it doesn't warm up a little."

"Yeah." They both acted like it didn't concern them. They picked up the bucket of washing and headed back to the medical office. Today was, in fact, the very day of the garden party—and sadly, it indeed didn't involve Maomao this year. Several of the physicians had been assigned to attend at the banquet, but that was all.

"Hey, do you see that? Looks like quite a crowd," Yao said. They could see a stream of people, soldiers and bureaucrats alike—many more bureaucrats than one ordinarily saw in this part of the palace.

Maomao clapped her hands when she realized they all appeared to be heading for the toilets. "They must be attending the garden party. They're all taking advantage of one last chance to do their business before the banquet starts. You can't leave during the meal."

"Don't you think we're a little far from the party, though?"

"Only the bigwigs get to use the closest place." Maomao knew because she'd experienced it herself a couple of years earlier. Not having a readily accessible toilet had been a real trial.

"Including His Majesty?"

"I'm pretty sure they build a new one specifically for His Majesty's use." You couldn't have the Emperor doing his business in any old restroom where who knew who had done who knew what. That was both the privilege and the curse of standing at the top of the nation's hierarchy.

Yao abruptly halted.

“Something wrong?” Maomao asked.

“Maomao... Let’s not go this way,” Yao said, grabbing Maomao’s hand.

“It’s the fastest route, though.”

“There’s someone I *don’t* want to see over there.”

She sent off in a new direction, away from the milling officials. So there was someone among the soldiers and secretaries trooping to the toilets that she wanted to avoid. Maomao certainly sympathized with the desire *not* to run into a particular person.

I wonder who it could be, though. Who might Yao know among the officialdom? Her uncle—her current guardian—perhaps. Or maybe it was one of the potential prospects her uncle had tried to set her up with. Knowing the answer wouldn’t have done Maomao any specific good, so she obediently followed Yao away.

No sooner had they gotten back to the medical office than En’en homed in on Yao. “Young mistress!”

“En’en,” Yao said slowly, “I’m a little cold.” Her cheeks and ears were indeed red, and En’en was quick to bring a blanket and some hot ginger tea. She allowed Maomao to have what was left of the tea, but she wasn’t as generous with the honey as she had been with Yao. Maomao breathed on her cup, then took a sip, feeling the warmth spread through her. The drink had a lovely aroma; En’en must have grated tangerine zest into it.

The medical office was kept warm for any injured or sick people who arrived, but that had the unfortunate side effect of making the occupants somewhat drowsy. More than once, Maomao had seen soldiers who’d ducked into the medical office to escape training on cold winter days dragged back out by their commanding officers.

The highest-ranking physicians were out today on account of the garden party, leaving only a younger doctor, who was comparatively easy on Maomao and the others. Everyone felt that with the cats away, the mice should take a little time to play.

“Ahh, that warmed me up. Let’s get back to work, then,” Yao said.

En’en replied, “Young mistress, you should stay here today. Let me and Maomao handle the outdoor work.”

Hey, I want to be inside too, Maomao thought.

“I couldn’t do that,” Yao said. Then she studied En’en for a second. “I know that look. My uncle’s been here, hasn’t he?” So Maomao had guessed right.

“Young mistress...”

“How was it? He didn’t cause too much trouble, did he?”

“N-No, mistress. He looked like he was ready to wait for you, though...”

En’en glanced back at the young doctor sitting at the desk. He stood and came over to them with a stern look. “I made sure to explain to him that this is a place for the sick and the injured, not just a waiting area. And I pointed out that if he stuck around, he would never make it to the garden party in time—that got him out of here.”

“I see. Thank you very much,” Yao said with a grateful dip of her head. En’en gritted her teeth and gave the doctor a jealous look.

She doesn’t have to worry. He wasn’t trying to impress Yao—he was hoping to get to her. Nonetheless, En’en, who lived her life for her “young mistress,” seemed intent on treating every man around the young lady as if he were a caterpillar.

Maomao transferred the laundered bandages to a stewpot and got ready to boil them. She would have liked to just hang around a little while longer, but finishing the task at hand came first.

“Maomao,” En’en said, and Maomao looked over at her. “I found you some kindling.”

She passed Maomao a hinged board with cloth stretched over it. When opened, it revealed a man’s portrait.

“He never gives up, does he?” Yao groaned, even as she went to the brazier to get a coal to start the oven. It was clear now why Yao’s uncle had stopped by. The portrait was obviously of a potential suitor, but it was impossible to tell how much it had been dressed up. The guy looked like he could have been an actor.

The young doctor kept shooting looks at Maomao and Yao as if begging them to hurry up and leave. He seemed to think being alone with En’en might give him a chance to get to know her better, but Maomao highly doubted it. The other young doctors had already given up on her—and of course on Yao, whom she watched like a hawk—long ago. This guy was too thick to get it. (One might add that Maomao seemed not to have been a part of their calculations from the first.)

I wonder if he was actually able to talk to her at all when it was just the two of them, Maomao thought. It was a simple question—but this doctor proved resolute. Even as she and Yao were leaving the office, Maomao could hear him saying, “Shall we continue our conversation, En’en? Maybe you could bring it up with Yao later too.”

There was no response, but if the guy could get Yao involved somehow,

En’en would put up with at least a little of his chitchat.

I’m sure she doesn’t see him as anything but a conversation generator at best, though. As she headed for the oven outside, Maomao reflected anew on how formidable En’en could be.

By afternoon the bandages had been boiled and dried. Maomao walked along, rubbing her hands together, looking forward to some lunch when she got back to the medical office. The garden party must have been on recess, because she could see a crowd gathering at the toilets again.

“You don’t need to use the bathroom, Yao?” she asked.

“N-No, I’m fine. What about you, Maomao?”

“I went a little while ago.”

Yao looked betrayed. Maomao, seeing that the toilets looked likely to get busy, had prudently relieved herself while Yao was doing the drying. “Sure you don’t want to go, Yao?” she asked again.

“Yes, I’m sure!”

The bathrooms were of course separated into men’s and women’s facilities, but with so many members of the opposite sex around, using them probably still required some courage. One could even see a few guys who just couldn’t hold it any longer ducking into the ladies’ restroom. The court ladies who were trying to use it looked positively disturbed.

“You’ve been to one of the garden parties, haven’t you, Maomao?”

“Did En’en tell you that?”

“Uh-huh.”

Maomao reflected afresh on En’en’s prowess at learning things.

“What’s it like?” Yao asked.

“Cold. It’s *not* the stuff dreams are made of, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

The party had looked pleasant enough, but for Maomao, who had been there purely as a serving woman, it had been a battle with the cold. Especially with Princess Lingli there—she’d still been an infant at the time and couldn’t be allowed to catch a chill. Maybe receiving a hair stick was *sort* of dreamy stuff, but Maomao was sure En’en must be keeping a close watch on them from somewhere unseen. And then there was the food. The need to check it for poison left everyone there ignorant of what the meal was really supposed to taste like. They sat sipping soup that had long since gone cold.

There’s hardly even any chance to put *poison in anything*, Maomao thought. Poisoning food was, in fact, a risky business. If you were going to do it, you had

better be ready for the consequences. Some people, though, were willing to pay the price—which was why Maomao herself had once tasted tainted soup.

Argh! I wish I could have some more of that...

"Maomao, is that, uh...a smile?" Yao asked, studying her closely.

"Oh! Pardon me." She'd found herself lost in the memory of that soup. You might assume a poison would be bitter or nauseating, but in fact many perfectly palatable things were poisonous. Like blowfish, or certain mushrooms.

As they passed the toilets, they heard a distinct "Hrgh!" of someone vomiting. They looked over and saw some men gathered around a well, rinsing their mouths out with water. Their physiques implied that they were soldiers, although they were wearing slightly nicer uniforms than usual: even the military men got dressed up for a garden party. As it happened, Maomao thought she recognized one of them.

"Do you think something's the matter?" Yao said.

"If you're curious, we could ask them."

"Huh? No, I—" Yao said, but Maomao was already heading for the well. Specifically, she was approaching one of the beefy men who looked like a big dog.

"Haven't seen you for a while, sir," she said.

"Oh! Hullo, miss," said Lihaku, looking perfectly friendly. He'd been at the garden party two years before as well; it wasn't such a surprise to see him here now.

"Is something wrong? I thought I heard vomiting."

"Ahh. Thanks for asking. It's no big deal. The food was just, uh, not quite good. Huh, guys?" Lihaku said, turning to his companions.

"Not quite good? That stuff was awful," one of them said. "And they serve that in the palace? The old bastard at the mess hall cooks better!"

"That soup! I knew it would be cold, but this was something else. There was too much of *something* in there, whatever it was. You think His Majesty's was as bad as ours?"

"Naw. He got something different. No way the Emperor would eat the same stuff as us."

"Yeah, I guess not!" The soldiers started laughing.

"The food was bad?" Maomao said. She knew the kinds of things they served at these parties. It might end up cold, but the food itself should have been top quality. Unless they really did serve something so different to the officialdom. "May I ask what was served? You said this was the soup?"

If the chef served a dubious meal to the Emperor or the high officials, he might soon lose his job, or even his head. But if the foul flavor was due to something that got in without his knowing it, that would be another kind of problem.

"It was just so salty," Lihaku said. "Maybe they were going for southern-style cuisine, you know, something different. They served these patterned eggs. It sure *looked* good." Upon taking a bite, though, the men had discovered the eggs were desperately salty, and the soup almost nauseatingly so.

"You said the eggs were 'patterned'?" Maomao asked. *Like tea eggs?* Making a tea egg involved cracking the shell of a boiled egg and steeping it in tea, resulting in a spiderweb pattern on the surface. After that, you could simply eat it. Maybe they'd been served at the garden party because they looked sort of fancy.

"We managed to force them down, but we were worried the rest of the meal would taste terrible too."

"Yeah! But nobody else seemed bothered. Our commander was even smacking his lips, all 'My, that was good!' Maybe his tongue stopped working."

The soldiers had continued eating, afraid that maybe they were the ones whose sense of taste had gone haywire. When they each got here and discovered there were other people who'd thought the meal tasted funny, they realized maybe something really was wrong.

"How long has it been since you all ate the soup?" Maomao asked.

"Hmm. Maybe an hour?" Lihaku said. "I had to fight the urge to throw up the whole time. I rushed here as soon as the recess was announced." He and everyone else there had obviously been sweating.

"An hour? Hmm. You look like you're in decent health."

"What's that mean? You're not seriously thinking it might have been poisoned, are you? Hey, look at us. We're fit as fiddles!"

"It depends on the poison. Certain kinds take longer to start working than others," Yao interjected. There was a touch of real emotion in her voice, the sound of someone who knew what she was talking about from firsthand experience.

"G-Geez, don't say that. You're awfully frightening for such a pretty lady, you know that?" Lihaku said, frowning.

"If you have any further symptoms, come to the medical office," Maomao said. "I'll give you some medicine that will make you vomit your insides out."

"But I need my insides to stay inside me!"

Maomao and Yao headed back to the office, leaving the pale-faced Lihaku behind them.

"What do you think's going on, Maomao?" Yao asked.

"My first thought would be that the salt clumped together. Normally it dissolves in soup, but it looks like maybe those men back there got a bit too much in their bowls." Perhaps the chef had used particularly large chunks of salt, or maybe some had been added late in the cooking process. Whatever the case, she would simply have to wait and see if they showed up at the medical office feeling worse.

"I see..." Yao didn't look completely convinced, but for the moment she decided to go with Maomao's hypothesis.

Everyone else was busy with the garden party, but for Maomao and Yao, this was a chance to go home early, and they were going to enjoy it. Today, they just had to clean up the medical office and then they were done for the day.

"Ahh, this was a nice, easy day. I only hope tomorrow will be so relaxed," the young doctor was saying to En'en. "If you've got some time after this, perhaps we might go to dinner, or—"

"You haven't written up the daily report," she replied, placing some paper firmly in front of the doctor. "Dr. Liu will be back any minute, so you'd better get writing." Then she took out an overgarment and put it on Yao. "It's cold out, young mistress. You must make sure you stay warm."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," said Yao, who also had a scarf piled around her neck.

Maomao pulled on a cotton jacket and planted herself in front of the young doctor. His name, incidentally, was Li, but as there were two other Li's in the office, calling him that wasn't very efficient. His personal name was Tianyu, not that Maomao or her companions had ever used it. "Please feel free to call me Tianyu. Don't be shy," he'd said at their first meeting—which was precisely why none of the young ladies ever had. Maomao, Yao, and En'en might each have had their own motivations for this obstinacy, but the end result was the same.

"See you tomorrow," Maomao said to Tianyu.

"See you tomorrow," Yao echoed.

"What would you like for dinner, young mistress?" said En'en.

Completely ignoring him. He must have talked her ear off today. Tianyu was waving to them as they left, but En'en didn't so much as glance at him. Meanwhile, Maomao was thinking at Yao: *Say pork! Pork, pork, pork!* A good,

fatty food would be perfect on a cold day like this. As soon as they left the office, a cold wind began to nip at their ears.

"Let's see... I think chicken sounds nice. Something crunchy on the outside!" Yao said. Maomao's telepathy had failed to reach her. But chicken was a good consolation prize.

"All right. Then we'll need something clean and sharp to go with it," Maomao said, inserting herself into the conversation.

"Good point. I wouldn't mind some raw fish and vegetables," Yao said.

En'en looked at Maomao. With her lips she said, "Okay, then, Maomao. We don't have enough vegetables—do you think you could buy some?" But her eyes communicated: *Those who don't work, don't eat.*

That was that, then. Maomao shrugged and nodded, but inside, she was trembling with fear.

Chapter 13: The Hair Stick Thief

The chicken did indeed turn out crispy on the outside, tender and juicy on the inside. Just the memory of it was enough to make Maomao salivate.

That was one delicious dinner, she thought, letting her mind wander over the previous day's meal as she did her work. She powdered some herbs in a mortar and swallowed her drool.

Maomao thought of herself as a halfway decent cook, but she had to admit she couldn't hold a candle to En'en in the kitchen. En'en had mentioned something in passing once about her older brother being a professional chef, but she was no slouch herself when it came to preparing food. The chicken skin had been grilled to perfection, hiding light-pink meat beneath. When Maomao had bitten into it, warm juices exploded in her mouth. It had been seasoned with salt and a crunchy black powder that seemed to be, of all things, pepper! En'en didn't hold back when it came to feeding Yao; Maomao had to think most of her wages went to food. And with Maomao getting in on so many of their meals recently, it couldn't be getting any cheaper.

Maomao paused. When she thought of it that way, she realized that maybe she should at least be contributing some food money. This was sure better than eating at some crappy diner somewhere; maybe she could at least cover ingredients.

"Hmm, all right," she said, nodding to herself.

Yao appeared beside her. "What are you nodding about? Dr. Liu's been calling for you."

"Oh, I see," she said, cleaning up the mortar and herbs.

"I can do that. Just get going. What did you do, anyway?"

"Nothing yet."

Nothing at all—so far. Yao's expression suggested that the question was intended as her equivalent of a joke—if a somewhat pointed one. Maomao was substantially more experienced as an apothecary than either Yao or En'en, so she was often given assignments the other two weren't. She was frequently sent out to collect ingredients, for example. The disparity in their tasks pained Yao—hence her barbed humor.

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She's really softened since we first met, though, Maomao thought. Had Yao changed, or did Maomao simply see her differently now?

She went to the room where the doctor was waiting. "You needed me, Dr. Liu?"

"Mm. Here." He handed her a letter, sealed in wax with a familiar seal.

Empress Gyokuyou...

There were probably other ways to get a letter to her, at least under normal circumstances. The fact that it was in Dr. Liu's hands implied it was something urgent.

"You're wanted at her palace immediately," he said. The letter said much the same; it contained no details.

"Very well," she said. "I'll find Luomen and—"

"No. Just you."

She didn't understand. A eunuch like her old man should have been perfectly qualified to examine the Empress. Why her alone?

"I can see you have questions—but you know who sent this letter and you know what she wants. There's nothing I can add. Don't waste time; get going." Dr. Liu seemed to have some qualms of his own, but this was the Empress they were dealing with. Even a chief physician couldn't argue with her.

"Yes, sir," Maomao said, and then, as instructed, she went.

She was taken from the medical office to Gyokuyou's palace by carriage. She wouldn't be leaving the palace grounds, but it would have been unseemly for her to simply walk between the outer and inner courts. She passed through a series of gates, and finally arrived at the Empress's pavilion.

Gyokuyou's residence in the rear palace had been perfectly sumptuous, but it was dwarfed by her current dwelling. The Empress's home must have been at least three times the size of the Precious Consort's. Maomao got out of the carriage and stood at the door, which was opened for her by a slim, pretty woman.

Haku-u, Maomao thought. They'd served together at the Jade Pavilion, if only briefly. She was one of three ladies-in-waiting who had come from Gyokuyou's hometown, a trio of sisters each separated by a year. They looked a lot like each other, so they wore differently colored accessories to help people tell them apart. The white hair tie this young woman wore reminded people that she was Haku-u, whose name meant "white feather." The others were Seki-u and Koku-u, although Maomao hadn't had much to do with any of them except the

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youngest, Seki-u.

"It's been a while," Haku-u said. Maomao was typically greeted by Yinghua and her companions, and she hadn't seen Haku-u or her sisters the last time she'd been here on rounds. "We've been waiting for you. Please, come this way." She took the tone one might use with a stranger. Unlike Yinghua's garrulous trio, the three sisters were more taciturn—or perhaps one might say more mature. Maomao got the message, in any case: *No need for pleasantries. Just come in.*

Maomao was used to Yinghua, Guiyuan, and Ailan hovering around when she arrived, but today it was quiet. "Has something happened?" she asked. She'd been suspicious from the moment she'd been called here alone.

Haku-u only showed Maomao to the reception room and said, "Here. You can ask Her Majesty yourself." Then she left.

Maomao entered the room to find Gyokuyou sitting on a couch, Hongniang standing beside her. Maomao offered a slow, respectful bow.

"It's been quite some time," Gyokuyou said, nodding at her in return.

"Yes, ma'am. I regret that it's been so long."

In point of fact, it had only been a month or so since the medical exam; not all that long.

"Do you have any inkling as to why I summoned you?" the Empress asked. Maomao shook her head. Gyokuyou sounded more subdued than usual; the mischievous twinkle in her eye was missing.

That look on her face, Maomao thought. She remembered that look. It was the same one she'd had the very first time Maomao had seen her, confronting Consort Lihua over the mysterious illness that had threatened both their children. A look of anxiety.

"Beating around the bush will serve no one. Better to explain things at once. Don't you agree, Hongniang?" Gyokuyou said, and looked at her chief lady-in-waiting.

Hongniang placed something wrapped in cloth on the table. She undid the wrapping to reveal a hair stick worked in silver with an intriguing design: a charm that resembled a lantern or a basket hung off the end. It was intricately sculpted, the work of a true master.

But there are some dark splotches, Maomao observed. Silver was quick to corrode, and the blotches made the hair stick half as lovely as it should have been. The sculpting itself was spectacular, yet when you looked at the thing as a whole, it somehow seemed lacking—mismatched or inconsistent. Like it was

missing something, some crucial piece.

It's not really...nice *enough for an empress to wear*. Maomao gave the hair stick a quizzical look. "What's this, milady?"

"This is what I was wearing at the garden party," Gyokuyou replied.

"You were, ma'am?" Maomao furrowed her brow. Gyokuyou had been wearing this in public? That seemed unlikely. Not least because Hongniang would never have allowed it.

"I know what you're thinking. No, the Empress would never have worn it to the party had it looked like this," Hongniang interjected.

Should've figured. If even Maomao could tell that the accessory lacked something, then the far more perceptive—and far less quiescent—Hongniang would never have stayed quiet about it. Maomao wondered what outfit Gyokuyou had been wearing to complement this accessory.

"We had the craftsman make this on rather short notice, but it was a fine piece of work. It has these dark patches now, but it was flawless when we got it. And there used to be a decoration in that charm. Something about half the size of the little basket."

"A decoration?" Maomao asked. Perhaps some sort of gemstone. Certainly it would look striking there. Perhaps it would even make a tinkling sound like a bell when the Empress walked. "If I may say so, it doesn't appear to be there anymore." The mesh of the basket was fine enough that she doubted the stone had simply fallen out.

"I wore this with my first outfit at the garden party," Gyokuyou said. "I left my seat just before noon to change clothes, and that was when I discovered it was missing."

Maomao didn't say anything immediately. There hadn't been a change of clothing during the garden party at the rear palace. Regardless, there weren't that many people who could have approached the high ladies. Perhaps only their attendants.

"Might one of the ladies-in-waiting around you have had sticky fingers?" Maomao ventured. Not one of Empress Gyokuyou's own servants, of course, but perhaps one of the women who had come to serve the meal.

Gyokuyou shook her head, but it was Hongniang who spoke up. "Quite frankly, we would be less worried if it had simply been stolen. But this hair stick was among some gifts that were offered to Her Majesty today."

If they were very lucky, that meant simply that the thief had had an attack of conscience and decided to return it. But then, the thief herself would need to be

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quite lucky to be able to tuck the item in among tribute intended for the Empress.

Not likely, huh?

Which meant it was a threat. *I can get close to you,* it said. *I can even sneak things into your palace.*

As a consort in the rear palace, Gyokuyou had been the target of more than one attempted poisoning by other women. Now she was the mother of the Crown Prince and lived in her own palace. That should have taken her further from danger, but then this happened...

"You can come back anytime you feel like it."

It was an offer Maomao had been given more than once, an invitation to come back and work for Gyokuyou again. She realized now, belatedly, that it wasn't just personal familiarity that had moved the Empress to make the suggestion.

"Maomao... Do you think you might be able to find the culprit?" Empress Gyokuyou asked. There was a smile on her face, but it was uneasy, and her hands shook visibly.

Maomao had always taken Gyokuyou for such a carefree person. In the rear palace, any woman who possessed His Majesty's Imperial affections was subject to brutal reprisals from her compatriots, yet Gyokuyou had never stopped smiling. She maintained a childlike curiosity about the world which, combined with her personal toughness, had made Maomao assume she would be perfectly fine without her.

But maybe I was wrong. She might be the Empress, the mother of the nation, but she was still a human being.

Maomao was in a room in the Empress's palace, looking at the hair stick. It was already late by the time they finished their conversation, so she'd been ordered to stay the night. She was told that her dormitory had been informed. Meanwhile, she was served dinner in her room.

She was still a little surprised. Her dorm was less than thirty minutes away. Staying out all night was one thing—but an outsider staying the night at the Empress's palace, that had to be a real nightmare.

I guess she won't feel safe until she finds out what's behind this hair stick. Still, had there really been no one but Maomao to whom the Empress could entrust this matter? Or was it something else?

Maomao sat down on the bed in the room that had been prepared for her and folded her arms. *Splotched silver...*

Silver corroded easily; it was quick to cloud up if you didn't take proper care of it. It had to be polished constantly. Nonetheless, the nobility liked using silver tableware—or perhaps more accurately, they *had* to use it. For silver also fogged when exposed to arsenic. Arsenic had no flavor, no smell, not even any color, but thanks to this unique property of silver, it was easy to detect. One might say people in high places couldn't afford *not* to use it.

Had Empress Gyokuyou been exposed to arsenic in some way, then? No, not likely: her mood notwithstanding, she seemed in fine physical health. She showed no signs of having been poisoned. But then what had happened to the hair stick?

Maybe it corroded after it was stolen? Suppose someone had tried to poison the Empress and failed, so they'd stolen the hair stick instead to blackmail her. *No*, Maomao decided. Too complicated. If there was some intention here, Maomao couldn't fathom what it was. What could the thief be after?

There was something else that bothered her too: "There's no sign that it was broken open." Hongniang had said there was supposed to be a large crystal inside, but it was now nowhere to be found.

A crystal...

Maomao gave the hair stick a gentle shake. It wasn't as if she expected the stone to fall out from some hidden crack—but to her surprise, a small, white granule landed on her skirt. "What's this?" She picked it up and squinted at it. She tried sniffing it. Silently, she got some water and a hand rag, then placed the particle on her tongue. "Hey. This is—" She'd just caught the taste of it when there was a knock at the door.

"Maomao? Do you have a second?" It was Yinghua, of all people.

"Yes? What's the matter?"

Normally, Yinghua might have shown up to chat or gossip, but today she didn't look in the mood. Maomao was glad to see her, though—there was something she wanted to ask.

"A-About the hair stick..." Yinghua said. She looked uncomfortable, but for Maomao, her timing was perfect.

"The 'crystal' that was mounted in this hair stick. Is there any chance..." She thought back to something she'd made when she'd served at the Jade Pavilion. "Was it a *salt* crystal?"

White lumps, salty to the taste. She'd made a few of notable size while she'd been at the Jade Pavilion, and she'd given some of those that had come out best to then-Consort Gyokuyou. If you didn't know what they were made of, you'd

have sworn they were real crystal. She'd kept them secret from Hongniang, so the chief lady-in-waiting didn't know about them.

Yinghua looked surprised for a second, but then she nodded. "Very nice, Maomao. I'm impressed you figured it out."

"So I guessed right." She picked up the hair stick with the cloth and gave it a shake. "What I don't understand is, why mount a chunk of salt in a hair stick? It was only ever going to break apart and fall out." She'd warned Gyokuyou when she gave her the salt crystals that they would melt if they were kept anywhere too humid. Maomao had given the lady some charcoal to act as a desiccant—but salt was salt, no matter how pretty it looked.

"Lady Gyokuyou's just been so bored lately. She thought she could at least entertain herself at the garden party."

So Empress Gyokuyou had been the mastermind behind this. Naturally, she hadn't told her upstanding chief lady-in-waiting. Maomao could see why Yinghua seemed uncomfortable.

"What did she plan to do if the crystal broke during the garden party?" These were events where the women appraised each other from the hairs on their heads to the tips of their toes. Back when she had been at the rear palace, a great many middle and lower consorts had imitated whatever Gyokuyou did in an effort to earn the Emperor's interest. No doubt many still would. An empty ornament on her hair stick would be humiliating.

"That's why she planned to change clothes. She figured it would last the hour before she swapped outfits."

The hair stick's lantern shape was striking and unique; it would draw everyone's attention. They would all be asking what that stone was in the ornament. Particularly the women helping out with the banquet: it wasn't only within the rear palace that ladies sought to gain His Majesty's affections. Perhaps Gyokuyou had enjoyed baffling the people around her, knowing that they were pondering what kind of stone she had used and where she'd found it. Or perhaps she savored the thrill of not quite knowing what she would do if the "stone" broke while she was still in this distinguished and vicious company. It was very much, well, Gyokuyou-ish, Maomao had to admit—but it was also dangerous.

Could it have been the lady-in-waiting assigned to keep watch on the hair sticks who took it? Maomao asked herself. It was certainly possible. If all the woman had done was take it, then have a change of heart or an attack of fear and return it, really, it would be a relief. But the hair stick wasn't such a simple thing

to return.

"Would you mind if I asked you what the environs were like at the garden party?" Maomao said to Yinghua.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean the seating arrangement, for example, and how things were behind the scenes."

"I see." Yinghua left the room and came back with paper and some writing utensils. Then she sketched a quick diagram of the banquet. "This is the center of the feast, where His Majesty was. To his left was the Lady Empress Dowager and Master Jin—I mean, the Moon Prince. Lady Gyokuyou was to his right. Master Gyokuen was a little ways away—he's still technically just a local governor, so he was given a place equivalent to a prime minister's."

A local governor—in other words, someone who ruled one of the provinces. In essence, Gyokuen was in charge of the entirety of Li's western reaches, centered around the western capital. (So, a *little* bit of that studying had stuck with Maomao.) The Prime Minister's seat was currently vacant; there had been some expectation that Jinshi would take it now that Shishou no longer occupied it, but he had been given a different rank.

The seating arrangement was reasonable enough, considering that one of the major objectives of this party was to give Gyokuen his name. Which, of course, would be accompanied by a promotion in prominence.

"And where did Lady Gyokuyou change clothes?"

"The banquet was close to her palace this time, so she just went there." There was a bathroom there, too, so it was easier on the ladies than before. "That made it a bit of a hike from the kitchen, though. I know the food always goes cold, but it must have been especially bad having to carry food for so many people so far."

Maomao knew that the food always cooled off during the time it took to check it for poison. She always thought it was a waste, those fine flavors disappearing with the chill.

"They put a big pot here, by the palace," Yinghua said, making a mark on her map.

Maomao studied it for a second. "Was there a guard by it?"

"I don't think so. It was probably the food for people without seats." The food for the people who needed their meals to be checked for poison would be staged elsewhere.

"And the hair stick disappeared while that pot was present?"

"Yes, that's right. Right in the middle of the meal. I was sent off to handle

something, so I left Lady Gyokuyou for a little while, but when I came back everyone was all in a tizzy about the hair stick."

Ahh, so that's what's going on here. Maomao looked at the hair stick. It made sense now. She knew where the discolorations had come from.

"You look like you've got an idea, Maomao."

"Do I?"

"You totally do! What is it? Tell me!"

That was a tricky request. She couldn't prove it yet; so far, it was all assumptions. "I don't have enough information."

"Sure you do! Tell me!" Yinghua pressed.

Maomao groaned, but she knew that continuing to refuse wouldn't make Yinghua any less vehement.

"All right, all right," she relented. "But I want to check one more thing first."

"What is it? I want to know what's going on! Right away!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait. I don't want to say the wrong thing and confuse the Empress."

Yinghua puffed out her cheeks, but was forced to accept that.

"Do you know who was in the palace during that time? It doesn't matter if you're not sure about everyone who was there. Just let me know who you're aware of."

"Okay, well..."

She started giving names, and Maomao wrote them all down.

It might be misleading to say she had solved the mystery, but she had a good idea where the hair stick had disappeared to.

That poses a problem of its own, though.

Between the information Yinghua had given her and Maomao's own guesses, things were pointing in a very fishy direction. She wanted to set Empress Gyokuyou's mind at ease, but she wasn't sure if she should tell her the whole truth. She worried that that might only upset her more.

How do I tell her? Maomao was just mulling over the question when there was a knock at her door. *Who is it this time?* She opened the door to find Haku-u. "What's the matter?" Maomao asked.

"It's a little chilly. I thought you might be cold, so I brought you an extra blanket," Haku-u said.

"Thank you very much. I'll take it from here."

"No. Today, you're a guest." Haku-u showed herself to be every bit as

diligent as she looked, coming in and making sure the blanket was arranged just so on Maomao's bed. Maomao stood by the window and watched, feeling a little funny. She glanced out between the window slats and saw it was snowing. "I guess it really is cold," she said.

Next, Haku-u added some coals to the brazier. "Would you like any incense?" she asked.

"No, thank you."

Haku-u was clearly very good at her job, but Maomao didn't feel there was any special need for her to do everything for her. As she recalled, Gyokuyou had known Haku-u since her youth in the western capital. She hadn't been here very long, but Yinghua and the other women Maomao had known since her time in the Jade Pavilion seemed to respect her.

She could've sent someone a little lower down the ladder.

"Certainly not. You're far too important a visitor. We wouldn't risk anything being done less than properly," said Haku-u. Oops. Had Maomao said that out loud? She squeezed her mouth shut to stop anything else getting out of it.

These people don't quite make sense to me, Maomao thought. Other than Seki-u, the youngest, Maomao had no real sense of what the sisters were like as people. She'd seen them teasing their little sister—but only a bit. Maomao silently watched Haku-u work for another moment, then took out the notes she'd made during her chat with Yinghua. She was glad she'd kept them close; she wouldn't have wanted Haku-u asking any questions if she'd noticed them.

Maomao resolved to go to sleep early tonight, but her heart was racing.

Sleep isn't very restorative when you have something on your mind. Maomao rubbed her tired eyes and sat up. She was glad Haku-u had brought the extra blanket; her breath fogged in the morning air and her ears were red. When she opened the window, she found snow had accumulated on the ground outside. She shivered as she changed into her day clothes, and no sooner had she gotten dressed than she heard a voice from the hallway.

"Maomao! Let's have breakfast!" It was Yinghua, bright and early.

Maomao decided to take her up on that. Guiyuan and Ailan were at breakfast as well. Guiyuan didn't seem to have changed much, except perhaps she was a little plumper than before; she was still gentle and easygoing. Ailan appeared to have continued growing, for Maomao had to look up even higher than usual to meet her eyes. It was enough to inspire jealousy in the vertically-challenged Maomao. Still, she couldn't help smiling a little to be back among such familiar

faces.

"Breakfast is extra special today," Yinghua announced. "There's dried abalone!"

"Wow!" the others chorused; even Maomao was moved to applaud. Maybe she'd swiped it from the leftover ingredients for Empress Gyokuyou's dinner last night.

The soup was simple, with good stock and only the faintest hint of salt. With the abalone in it, though, it proved highly edible. The rice was likewise the best stuff, demonstrating that when a woman became Empress, her ladies' diets benefited accordingly.

As the four of them chatted, Maomao looked around. Prompted by her restless demeanor, Guiyuan asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing really. Don't the others have breakfast, though?" She didn't see the *-u* siblings, or the other new ladies-in-waiting that Gyokuyou must have accumulated upon being made Empress.

"Oh! Miss Haku-u and her sisters eat in another room, and the other ladies-in-waiting don't eat in the palace at all."

"Yeah," Ailan added. "It's too bad. This would be a good chance to get to know them. They're always so serious at work."

I think it's more that you *three are a bit lax...* Still, that made it easy to be around them.

Yinghua and her cohort had served Gyokuyou a long time, since her days as a consort in the rear palace, but Haku-u's acquaintance with the Empress went even further back, which must have been why Guiyuan felt obliged to refer to her respectfully. Haku-u might not rank as high as Hongniang, the chief lady-in-waiting, in their eyes, but Maomao got the sense that she still stood above Yinghua and the others.

Maybe even more so than the last time I was here. Yinghua and her friends had been known to push back against other consorts' ladies-in-waiting—but really only if they spoke ill of Gyokuyou. Haku-u and her sisters were companions and colleagues, and Maomao doubted Yinghua or the other girls felt any real hostility toward them.

Speaking of Yinghua, she asked, "So, Maomao. Do you know who the culprit is yet?"

"It's a little tricky," Maomao said. A neat way to dodge the question. The other girls looked deflated.

"If you haven't figured it out yet, Maomao, you could come back here,"

Yinghua suggested. “We probably can’t convince them to let us have you just to make medicines and stuff, but if there was some sort of reason...”

“That’s right,” Guiyuan added. “We’ve got lots more rooms than we did in the Jade Pavilion. And plenty of stoves!”

“I’ll bet you could get your hands on some imported medicines here,” offered Ailan.

Imported medicines! Maomao very nearly jumped at that opportunity. *No! Bad Maomao!*

She took a sip of her tea to calm herself. “I’m learning my craft from my father and the other doctors right now. I can’t just switch jobs. Imagine what a burden it would put on the people I’m working with.”

She freely admitted that the idea of serving Empress Gyokuyou had its attractions. But joining the great lady’s staff would bring problems of its own.

Like that freak.

What if the monocled strategist started lurking around the Empress’s palace? In his own mind, he would just be trying to see Maomao, but that wasn’t what scandalized onlookers would see.

It was inconceivable that Empress Gyokuyou didn’t know about the relationship between Maomao and the strategist by now, wasn’t it? *Specifically, that it’s all a delusion on his part, and we’re complete strangers.*

To be quite blunt, Maomao wondered if there hadn’t been some mistake; if she wasn’t the offspring of some other patron of the Verdigris House. At least, so she liked to think. Although she knew the chances were slim.

Things would have been so much easier if Gyokuyou had simply viewed Maomao as a pawn to be used, but she had genuine regard for Maomao’s abilities. *I can’t just ignore her.* Not to mention that the gazes of Yinghua, Guiyuan, and Ailan were practically burning a hole in Maomao at that moment.

She was just trying to decide how she could get out of this situation when a young woman with a red hairband came in. She looked a lot like Haku-u, but her face revealed that she was somewhat younger—about Maomao’s age. She was the youngest of the three sisters, and the only one Maomao had any real acquaintance with. She used to deliver Xiaolan’s letters to her.

“What’s up, Seki-u?” Yinghua asked.

“Empress Gyokuyou is asking for Maomao,” she answered without elaboration. Maomao finished her breakfast and picked up her bowl.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it. Just leave it there,” Guiyuan said, so Maomao did.

“Can’t wait to hear when you’ll be joining us!” Yinghua called, all three of

the young women waving encouragingly. Maomao offered a bow in return, then went to see the Empress.

In Gyokuyou's room Maomao found not only Hongniang and Haku-u, but the prince and princess as well. The princess was setting a panoply of toys around the Crown Prince, who was mostly ignoring them. Maybe she thought they were playing together.

When Haku-u saw that Maomao had come, she picked up the Crown Prince. "Seki-u, the princess," she said.

"Yes, of course," Seki-u replied, taking Lingli by the hand.

"Play more!" the princess said. She must have been about three years old now, and was obviously learning to talk. She didn't seem to remember Maomao, though, studying her face as if seeing her for the first time. Maomao was a little disappointed by that, but it was what it was. She gave the princess a friendly wave.

Haku-u was about to leave with the prince in her arms when Maomao impulsively grabbed her sleeve. "What is it?" Haku-u said, her expression betraying her displeasure at this show of impropriety.

"Could you remain here?" Maomao asked.

"To what end?"

"I'd like you to hear this conversation."

Haku-u's expression didn't change, but Hongniang stepped into the hallway and waved down Ailan, who happened to be passing by. "Watch the child, please," she said, taking the prince from Haku-u and giving him to Ailan. The child burbled and pulled on Ailan's hair; she carted him off with a strained smile on her face.

"Do you have something in mind, Maomao?" Empress Gyokuyou asked. Neither she nor Hongniang said anything about Haku-u's continued presence. They figured it would be quicker simply to forge ahead with the discussion.

"This," she said, and held out the Empress's hair stick.

"You've figured out who was behind its disappearance?" Gyokuyou asked.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. But I believe I can explain why it became blemished and why the stone inside disappeared."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, ma'am." Maomao took out the diagram Yinghua had drawn the night before. "You retired to your palace to change outfits, correct? And it was while you were doing so that you realized that the hair stick was missing."

“That’s right. Unfortunately, there was no time to look for it. I had to get changed.”

I thought so. The commotion hadn’t occurred at the time the hair stick disappeared.

“Did you think perhaps you had simply dropped it, rather than that it had been stolen?”

“Yes, I was in such a hurry. A branch brushed my head as I went by. I thought maybe it fell out then.”

“Would that have been around here?” Maomao asked, pointing to a spot on the diagram.

“Yes, right there. There was a stand right in my way, and as I tried to go around it the branch caught me.”

A platform: in other words, the stewpot, Maomao suspected. She glanced over at Haku-u, but the other woman’s expression remained unchanged. *Maybe I’m wrong about this*, she thought, but either way, having Haku-u there would make things quicker.

“To make a long story short, I believe the hair stick wasn’t stolen—I think it simply fell,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Gyokuyou asked.

“Precisely that. Milady, the cause of your distress is that you believe the hair stick was stolen, then sent back to you as a threat.” The hair stick was discolored, the stone placed in it missing, as if to say: *This is what I’ll do to you.* Any noble who saw clouded silver would immediately think of poison.

“Wouldn’t you feel much better if you knew that neither of those things was intentional?”

“I suppose...”

“Furthermore, milady, am I wrong in thinking you have some idea what happened to the stone?”

Empress Gyokuyou twirled some hair around a fingertip. Her eyes brimmed with emotion.

“Get to the point, please! What happened to the stone that was in the hair stick?” Hongniang demanded, finally unable to wait any longer.

“Empress... Have you any more of those stones?” Maomao said.

“I guess I have to come clean eventually,” Gyokuyou said, resigned. She stood and fetched a small box from a corner of the room. She opened it to reveal a translucent, many-faceted crystal.

“May I use this?” Maomao asked.

“You were the one who gave it to me.”

Maomao picked up the stone in one hand and a carafe of water in the other. “Could somebody please get me a vessel?” Haku-u brought a bowl. Maomao put the stone in the bowl and then filled it with water.

“It’s...melting?” Hongniang said.

“Perhaps you’d like to try a sip. Although I warn you, you may cringe. Because that’s salt.”

“Salt?!” Hongniang really hadn’t known. If she had, she never would have allowed the Empress to use the faux crystal in her hair stick. “L-Lady Gyokuyou! What’s going on?” she exclaimed.

“H-Hee hee... Well, it was so very pretty. And nobody noticed, did they?” A mischievous smile came over the Empress’s face. It suited her much better than grim anxiety.

“I never knew salt could take on such a fine form,” Haku-u said, observing the dissolving crystal.

“It often doesn’t. I chose the ones that had crystallized in the most appealing shapes. You put some salt in boiling water, not too much, so it can all dissolve. Then you let it cool. You have to put something small in it to form a core, and then you let everything evaporate. As you repeat the process, the crystal gradually gets bigger. I suppose the important thing to note is that silk is the ideal material for the thread from which you hang it.”

“Maomao... You even made *that* while you were in the Jade Pavilion?” Hongniang asked.

Maomao didn’t say anything. She couldn’t get mad at Maomao now, could she? The statute of limitations had to be up.

“All right, so the ‘stone’ dissolved. It’s gone,” Hongniang said. “But what about the discolored silver?”

“A great many things can cause silver to grow cloudy,” Maomao said, drawing a small circle in a corner of the diagram. “Eggs, for example.”

“Eggs?” The other three women looked at her, puzzled.

“That’s right. You know the smell a rotten egg gives off?”

All three of them shook their heads. It was the maids who took out the garbage—they had probably never smelled the odor of rot before. Maomao decided to try a different analogy.

“How about boiled eggs? You know how those smell, yes?”

“Ah, that I know,” Gyokuyou said.

“It’s a rather unique aroma, but there’s another place you can smell the same

thing—at certain hot springs."

"Oh! I know what you mean," the Empress said. She must have bathed in a hot spring before. Maybe there were one or two of them on the journey from the western capital to this city.

"Certain substances in those springs contain sulfur. So do boiled eggs—if you eat them with silverware, the utensils can become discolored."

"Yes, of course," Hongniang said, looking like she couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it before. She had a good guess now why the hair stick had darkened—for she knew what had been served at the garden party.

"The hair stick dropped into a pot containing boiled eggs," Maomao said. "The salt crystal dissolved in the water, while the eggs discolored the silver."

It probably also explained why Lihaku had found the soup so unbearably salty.

"But how did the hair stick end up in the pot?" Gyokuyou wondered. "Do you suppose it simply fell in there by chance?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. It could have been coincidence, or someone could have put it in there."

"Why in the world would they do that?" Haku-u asked, squinting at Maomao.

"Suppose someone is preparing a meal when they find an ornate hair stick. Then, a lady-in-waiting appears asking if they've seen just such a hair stick anywhere. What do you think they would do?"

Would they immediately hold it up and say, "Is this what you're looking for?" Or might they try to play dumb? Or a third possibility...

"They might panic and try to hide it somewhere," Maomao said.

"You're suggesting that before they knew what they were doing, they'd thrown it into the cookpot in front of them?" Haku-u said.

"Yes," Maomao said, although she felt somewhat guilty about the vague nature of her hypothetical situation. "So the hair stick ends up in the pot, whether intentionally or accidentally. But when it's taken out, the silver is clouded and the stone is gone." Hardly a state in which it could simply be returned.

"Just a moment. If one of the servants found it—well, wouldn't it be quite difficult for them to give it back?" Hongniang asked.

"Indeed it would."

So they came to the matter of how the hair stick had made its way back to the Empress.

"I don't believe a mere servant could have hidden the hair stick among a delivery of gifts to you. They must have had help." And this was when the hair

stick, which had seemed simply lost, came to look like a threat.

Maomao couldn't be sure about what had happened—but she had her suspicions. This was why she'd had Haku-u stay in the room. But although she'd been keeping a close eye on the other woman, she'd seen nothing unusual in her look or behavior. Maybe her poker face was just that good—or maybe she really didn't know.

What if one of the ladies-in-waiting, someone who served the Empress, had found the hair stick near the palace? Someone in that position could easily have tucked the hair stick into a delivery. Maomao was virtually certain that it was one of Gyokuyou's own ladies who had returned the hair stick, even though she must have known the distress it would cause to get the accessory back in such a state.

Hongniang would have reported the matter directly to Gyokuyou; she knew the Empress well enough to know that she wouldn't need to fear some arbitrary punishment. The same for Yinghua, Guiyuan, and Ailan. The three all knew about the salt "crystal"; they would have been able to explain what had happened, and would have had no reason to hide anything.

But what about Haku-u? Given her position, one might have expected her to simply be honest and report the hair stick to Gyokuyou. She knew the Empress was gracious, that she would be unlikely to mete out harsh punishment over one ruined hair stick. There had to be some reason she had chosen not to come forward.

"It's almost as if one of the ladies-in-waiting deliberately returned the hair stick without saying anything in order to make the Empress think she was being threatened," Maomao said.

"Wh-What do you mean?" Hongniang asked, disturbed.

"Exactly what I said. Empress Gyokuyou is a kind and cheerful woman. Personally, I like her very much. But I could see someone thinking that she's too soft to survive in this den of iniquity." Maomao looked at Haku-u. She'd considered the possibility that some other palace serving woman had been involved, but when she looked at Yinghua's list of people who had been around the Empress during the garden party, she'd seen no names she didn't recognize. It had been only the "classic" four women and the trio of sisters.

"Ahh. I see what this is about," said Empress Gyokuyou, a touch of frustration in her voice. She slowly turned to Haku-u. "It was a warning to make me mind my behavior so that those around me might not take me too lightly." She'd said precisely what was on Maomao's mind. The Empress seemed to have

her own idea of who the culprit was.

"You didn't do it, did you, Haku-u? And I know Seki-u wouldn't dare," Gyokuyou said. "Which leaves..."

"Koku-u," Haku-u said, no emotion in her voice as she spoke her sister's name.

"Koku-u? But why?" said Hongniang. She sounded surprised, but Gyokuyou looked as if everything made sense to her.

"I think it must have to do with the letter I received the other day," she said. "Koku-u was the one who brought it to me."

"Oh!" exclaimed Haku-u.

Letter? Had someone sent the Empress something threatening? *Maybe it came from a political enemy*, Maomao thought. She briefly entertained the possibility that it had been Consort Lihua, who also had a young son. But she quickly thought, *No, not her.* Then perhaps the former heir apparent, His Majesty's younger brother Jinshi. *Yeah, not likely.*

But then... What about Haku-u and her sisters? No one would accuse them of being less than devoted to Empress Gyokuyou, but one thing set them apart from her longer-serving ladies.

"If I may ask a question of Lady Haku-u," Maomao said. "Did you think, perhaps, that it was Master Jinshi who had stolen and then returned the hair stick?"

After a grudging pause Haku-u said, "Well, doesn't that seem like the obvious thing?"

"Haku-u, I told you that he of all people would never do such a thing." Gyokuyou had a sad smile on her face. She knew very well that he had no interest in being part of the succession. Hongniang as well as Yinghua and the others were likewise familiar enough with Jinshi to know that he wouldn't make threats like that. Maomao was fully aware that Jinshi saw his own status as nothing more than a burden. All of which was why she'd deliberately approached Haku-u with her supposition.

"You think that the way she acts, it's only a matter of time before some unsavory person insinuates themselves with Lady Gyokuyou," Maomao said.

"I'm sorry, but yes, I do," Haku-u said, and it was hard to miss that she was looking at Maomao. Hongniang looked scandalized.

Really? That's where she's taking this? Maomao thought, a little uncomfortable.

"Lady Gyokuyou needs to realize that there are enemies all around her,"

Haku-u said.

"I do understand that," Gyokuyou said. "But it's no reason to show my fangs even to my friends. Say, Haku-u... Is this something you heard from your father?"

"No, ma'am. I thought of it on my own." She turned her almond-shaped eyes on the Empress. "But are you saying that even Master Gyoku-ou can be trusted?"

Gyoku-ou? That was a new name to Maomao, although she assumed he was a relative of Gyokuyou's.

"What *was* in that letter he sent you?" Haku-u pressed.

"I see. Koku-u must have secretly read it," Gyokuyou said. Her head drooped.

So Koku-u stole a look at...a letter? What's going on here? It was all over Maomao's head, but this Gyoku-ou was evidently someone to watch out for.

"He's my older brother. He didn't write anything out of line," said the Empress. Maomao was aware of Gyokuyou's older brother, and knew that he was in charge of the lands to the west while their father was here in the capital. The eccentric strategist's former aide, Rikuson, had been sent westward for Gyoku-ou's benefit. But it looked like there was something going on here.

"Are you so sure he's no villain?" asked Haku-u. "Surely you know who it was that continually came up with reasons not to send you new serving women as the number of your ladies-in-waiting dwindled one by one."

That startled Maomao, but Haku-u wasn't finished. "If we hadn't come, milady, you wouldn't be able to live as befits your station!" There was force in her voice, nothing like her usual detached demeanor.

Maybe I should excuse myself? Maomao thought. This had nothing to do with her, and it might have been best for her to leave—but try as she might, she couldn't find an appropriate way to orchestrate her exit.

"If you won't tell me what's in the letter, Empress Gyokuyou, then I'll guess. Before I left the western capital myself, I learned that Master Gyoku-ou had adopted a young foreign woman. It's been over a year now—more than long enough for her to acquire the refinements expected of a well-bred young lady."

"Haku-u!"

"Lady Hongniang, I will not go about furtively, as Koku-u did. I'll speak my mind. I don't care if Master Gyoku-ou is Master's Gyokuen's son or Lady Gyokuyou's older brother; I don't trust him! He's trying to send a young woman who looks exactly like Lady Gyokuyou to the rear palace. Why? Well, imagine

if she gained the affections of both His Majesty and the Crown Prince—and then something happened to our mistress."

It was pure speculation, what she had said—and yet it was by no means outside the realm of possibility.

"My father would never allow it," Gyokuyou said.

"Master Gyokuen is certainly more than intelligent enough to see through Master Gyoku-ou's feeble scheming," Haku-u said.

Hongniang looked relieved. "There's no problem, then."

"His perspicacity *is* the problem. Master Gyokuen will certainly back whoever he thinks will bring him the greatest benefit," Haku-u said, her voice hollow. "Just as he did when he destroyed the Yi clan."

The Yi clan!

They had formerly been one of the named clans, and had ruled over the western reaches—until they'd incurred the wrath of the empress regnant and been annihilated.

"We owe you so much, Lady Gyokuyou, and one reason we serve you here is in order to protect you. Master Gyokuen is not my—*our*—ruler, nor is his son." There was a fire in Haku-u's eyes as she spoke.

I wonder what she's seen in her life, Maomao thought, but she could only imagine. It wasn't her place to press or pry.

"Please, be careful of Master Gyoku-ou. I'm begging you. I'm asking you with all my heart..." Haku-u's gaze went slowly to Maomao. "...Please, surround yourself with people you trust. You never know what may happen."

Gyokuyou and Hongniang likewise looked at Maomao, who said, "Wh-Why is everyone...?" She had a bad feeling about this that wouldn't go away.

"Maomao... I *do* hope you'll consider it," Gyokuyou said, her eyes like a puppy's.

"You wouldn't want to see Lady Gyokuyou get poisoned, would you?" Hongniang asked with a slight smile.

"The world is a rough place, but there *are* people who would never betray a trust," Haku-u added. Was she in on this?

Maomao pointedly avoided all three of their gazes, but she could feel they almost had her cornered.

Chapter 14: The Go Contest (Part One)

Maomao gave the bandages a mighty thwack. The autumn breeze caught the drying white strips of cloth and they fluttered against the cloudless blue sky. The weather seemed the exact opposite of the clouds that darkened Maomao's heart.

She'd felt she couldn't simply walk away from Empress Gyokuyou's palace on a note like that. She'd been saved by a message from Dr. Liu. He could be hard on his subordinates, but he also looked out for them.

Maomao hadn't realized the Empress was so cornered—and not by some obvious political enemy, but by a member of her own family.

Her older brother...

She'd heard that the Empress was the daughter of a concubine. Gyokuen was an old man, so Gyokuyou's half-brother Gyoku-ou must have been considerably older than she was. Complicated family relations were hardly unusual among the nobility, and it seemed Gyokuyou was no exception.

I wonder what happens after this. From what Haku-u had said, Gyokuen had his own games he was playing. He would be Empress Gyokuyou's ally only so long as there was something in it for him—so what would happen if she lost the Emperor's affections? Or for that matter, what if something should happen to the Crown Prince?

Even if you're not interested in power, there are times when you need it to survive, Maomao thought. She sighed as she plunged her hands into the freezing water. It was so cold, it felt like her fingertips were going to fall off. And the weather would only get colder, so working with water would become more unpleasant still. En'en, with her intense devotion to her young mistress, had been plying Yao with balm to keep her skin from chapping.

As she peered at the blue sky, Maomao had a thought. *I wonder what that picture was about.* The eerie image drawn by the little girl, Jazgul.

That reminded her that the shrine maiden from the west was still living in Li. How was she doing? Well enough, no doubt, with the former consort Ah-Duo to look after her. Yet though she had indeed once been one of the Emperor's ladies, Ah-Duo, Maomao reflected, seemed destined to take all the country's dark secrets upon herself. Her home was a haven for the surviving Shi clan children,

as well as Suirei, who, though unrecognized, was the granddaughter of the former emperor and the niece of the current one. And now the shrine maiden of Shaoh, who was supposed to be dead, was there too.

Ah-Duo, the beauty in men's clothing, took all of this in her stride, but how must it appear to those around her? Well, in one sense, it didn't. All these things were done in complete secrecy, and wouldn't be discovered so easily. But there were plenty of people with sharp noses in the court. *I hope none of them catch her scent.*

With that thought in her mind, Maomao poured the last of the water from the bucket into a canal.

"There isn't a full day's work to do here," Dr. Liu groaned. It was an hour when the medical office would normally have been crawling with injured soldiers, but today it was deserted.

"What can we do? Everyone's playing hooky—starting with the head honcho himself," said the young doctor, Tianyu. He wore a sarcastic smile, but he looked disappointed. In his hand he held a Go book. "But even more of the civil officials are cutting work today. I hear there were some real brawls about who would get to take today off. At least the soldiers can pretend they're going over to keep an eye on things."

Maomao knew Tianyu himself had been desperate to get the day off, but he'd ended up here at work. A minimum staff was always needed in the medical offices, so physicians found it harder than most to take vacations.

"Seeing as there's pretty much nothing to do, I could probably just go home, couldn't I?" Tianyu asked, but that sort of wheedling wouldn't fly with Dr. Liu.

"Since we've finally got some time on our hands, we should use it to mix up some medicines, replenish our supply." The elderly doctor had a nasty grin on his face; he was enjoying turning the screws.

Maomao's eyes lit up at the mention of making medicines. "What should we make, sir?" she said.

"Er, ahem. Yes. I'm sorry to take the wind out of your sails when you've finally found some enthusiasm, but..." He held out a cloth-wrapped package. "I need you to deliver this for me."

Maomao immediately scowled.

"I know that look. You're thinking, *Who does this geezer think he is?*"

"Perish the thought, sir," she said dutifully.

"Sir, perhaps *I* could make that delivery..." Tianyu ventured.

“No, you couldn’t.”

Well. No room for argument. If this was something Maomao needed to handle personally, she feared to know what exactly it might entail.

“I want you to take it here,” Dr. Liu said, taking out a map of the capital and pointing to a public square near the theater where the White Lady had performed her wonders.

“Here, sir?”

“Not your favorite place, I take it. It’s obvious from the look on your face.”

It certainly wasn’t—because at that moment, that particular square was hosting a major event. Namely, one related to Go. It was all too easy to guess who would be there. Maomao didn’t know what strings he’d had to pull to get such a prime location, and for two days, no less—this must be quite a large tournament.

“I assume Dr. Kan will be there. He wasn’t assigned to it, but he volunteered to take point.”

Maomao thought she could see what Dr. Liu was getting at. *He tried to set up a bulwark for me.*

There was no telling what the freak strategist might try, but having Maomao’s old man there would help diffuse the situation. Chances were, Maomao was being sent for much the same reason.

“There are a lot of people there, which means someone is going to feel unwell, whether from playing Go or whatever. This isn’t the sort of thing the medical office would usually involve itself in, but don’t you agree that moments like this are the time to offer a helping hand?” Dr. Liu said, but it sounded rehearsed. She smelled Lahan, who had actually organized the tournament. He knew her old man wouldn’t say no, and that he could get to Maomao by using Dr. Liu, a superior whom she couldn’t refuse.

That no-good...

En’en was interested in Go, so she and Yao had taken the day off, while Maomao was stuck here.

“This is your job, now. I trust you can do it professionally,” Dr. Liu pressed. All Maomao could do was nod. Nod, and ignore the fact that Tianyu was looking at her, green with envy.

She didn’t have to look at the map to figure out where to go—she just had to follow the flood of people carrying Go books. Game boards were set up here, there, and everywhere in the square, attracting crowds of people of all kinds—

young and old, men and women alike. A cloth had been hung, the flimsiest excuse for a wind block, and there were only wooden boxes on which to put the boards. A poor show. And holding an event like this outside so close to the end of the year—it was practically begging for people to catch cold.

Still...

With so many people around, even this paltry excuse for a venue started to look rather fine, and indeed was suffused with a surprising warmth. Main-street restaurants and drinking establishments had established outposts here in the square. Children begged their mothers to buy them treats. Hot ginger water and wine were being distributed to keep people warm, although the wine had been heated to take the alcohol out of it.

We've seen too many drunks make trouble at festivals.

It wasn't just Go-related paraphernalia, either—Shogi pieces, card games, and even Mah-jongg tiles could be seen around, perhaps at the instigation of the event organizers. There were even shops selling ornaments and personal accessories, so even people with no interest in the game of Go packed themselves into the square.

That's a very Lahan-esque idea, Maomao thought. He did love the mercantile trade. She was sure he was charging the shops for the prime location.

Maomao threaded her way through the crowd until she saw some familiar faces. "Yao! En'en!"

There they were. Yao was rubbing salve into a child's skinned knee, while En'en administered some medicinal tea to a shivering elderly person.

"Maomao? What happened to working?" Yao asked, giving her a look that made it clear she assumed Maomao had skipped out on the medical office.

"Dr. Liu sent me here on an errand. And anyway, what happened to *not* working?"

"Oh. It's thanks to your, uh, 'older brother,'" Yao replied. That immediately put a scowl on Maomao's face. "Dr. Kan wasn't supposed to work today, either, but he got roped in. And then your older brother said it was too much for Dr. Kan to handle alone and that he wanted us to help too."

"You should've just told him no." She felt bad for her old man, but Yao and En'en were supposed to be off today. They weren't obliged to work like the rest of the medical office. Lahan should have just hired some of the city doctors instead of making her dad and the girls do everything, anyway. And now he was using Maomao too. It was just like that skinflint. "You should send him a bill," Maomao said, suddenly of a mind to wring a few pennies out of the tousle-

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haired man with his round spectacles.

"Oh, I don't mind. I'm not that interested in Go," Yao said. She finished treating the child's wound and sent him on his way with a "There we are."

"Thanks, miss!" the kid said.

Oh hoh. Maomao noticed the little smile on Yao's face as she waved goodbye to the child. The smile disappeared abruptly when Yao noticed Maomao looking at her. En'en shot Maomao a little thumbs-up as if to say: *See? Isn't my mistress cute?* She seemed to be enjoying herself, even if she didn't get to play Go.

"If you're on an errand, I assume you're looking for Dr. Kan? He's over there," she said, pointing to the theater where the White Lady had held her performances. It was a large building and used to hold events frequently, but it had been shuttered for some time. "I think the original plan was to hold the entire contest in there. But...well, you see." The boards scattered around the square spoke to how many entrants there had been.

"Nice that it's such a success, I guess, but there's clearly more than the permitted number of people here," Maomao agreed. Good for them that the square had been there to spill out into, but it presented any number of problems. She assumed there would be people getting injured and feeling sick. If only they'd held the contest in a warmer season.

The elderly person En'en had been tending to seemed to be feeling better; they gave a gap-toothed grin and looked intent on going back to play more Go, so En'en placed a handkerchief around their neck. The weather was clear but dry. If someone got a parched throat and started coughing, a cold could spread like wildfire.

Maomao's father, of course, was well aware of that. People trotted back and forth among the players carrying cups and large bottles. Anytime one of the players raised their hand, someone would pour from a bottle into one of the cups and give it to them. Maomao presumed it was hot yuzu water or ginger water—something good for the throat. Blankets were being handed out to anyone who was shivering. There was even a fire for those whom even the blankets couldn't keep warm. Her old man had done everything he could.

"Say, Maomao." En'en came over and whispered in her ear. "Dr. Kan isn't the only one over there. Grand Commandant Kan is as well." Maomao didn't say anything to that, but looked at her delivery with an expression of intense disgust. En'en said, "I wish I could say I'd take it over for you, but honestly, I sort of need you to deliver it."

“Why is that?”

“Because when everything’s over, En’en gets to play a game against the grand commandant,” Yao said.

“That’s right. It’s a real honor!”

In other words, Maomao should keep her mouth shut and go see the freak strategist.

“I can’t believe I get the privilege for free,” En’en said.

“What do you mean, free?”

“Usually it would cost ten silver pieces, but we were told that if we helped out we could have a game for free.”

I think nothing *is about what it’s worth, isn’t it?* Maomao thought. Why would anyone pay that kind of money?

“I’m not sure we could afford it on our salaries otherwise,” Yao said.

Your desserts aren’t a lot cheaper... The snack she ate every day to improve her beauty, health—and bust—was no cheap eat. Did she realize how much it cost each month? Someone’s *probably making sure she doesn’t,* Maomao reflected. Very in character for En’en.

“Let’s keep our thoughts to ourselves,” said En’en. (This seemed to be aimed at Maomao.) “If you win three games in the square out here, you can proceed into the theater, and if you win three games in there, you earn the right to challenge the grand commandant himself.”

“So it’s not just pay to play? Even if you played as fast as possible, winning six games would take a while,” Maomao said, giving En’en a puzzled look.

“That’s right—you have to battle your way to the privilege. As far as time, the tournament goes through tomorrow. I’m not sure I could have managed to win six games, so if I can get a teaching game from him I’ll consider myself very lucky.”

How condescending could he get? Maomao wondered. Not to mention that tomorrow, the second day of the tournament, she herself was supposed to be off duty.

I can guarantee I’ll be called in, though. With a distinct “Ugh,” she made for the theater.

Chapter 15: The Go Contest (Interlude)

"There, that should do it." Maamei finished some work and stopped to stretch. The Moon Prince's office was far neater and more orderly than it had been before they'd redistributed the mountain of paperwork to the people whose *actual* jobs the assignments were.

Only one other person was in the office with Maamei: her younger brother, Baryou, who occupied a sectioned-off corner of the room.

"Ryou, think you'll be able to wrap things up?" She could take such an informal tone since it was just the two of them. Then again, she would have comported herself exactly the same even if the Moon Prince had been present.

"Yes, I should be able to finish the rest today," Baryou said. His face, pale as an unripe gourd, peeked over the divider. He never spoke or even showed himself except in front of those he was closest to. Now he said, "Something in here is not like the others." He passed Maamei a sheet of paper. "I think perhaps it concerns our dear Kan."

"Kan?" The surname alone wasn't enough for Maamei to follow.

"The man of La. Grand Commandant Kan."

"Ah, the eccentric strategist. Don't be coy; say what you mean."

Her brother might not be much for human company, but he had a perfectly firm grasp of who worked where and what their names were. He had a sharp mind, but a frail body and psychological constitution. Maamei was all too aware that a sound body, firm mind, and robust capability rarely met in one person. If Baryou could have been mixed together with her other younger brother, it would have been perfect.

"If it's no special hurry, let's take it to him later," she said.

"Are you quite sure?"

"I don't think it would serve any purpose even if we took it over this minute." Maamei plucked a piece of paper from the folds of her robe. On it was written *Go Tournament* and the details thereof.

"Ahh, that was today?" Baryou said. He had some interest in Go, but lacked the courage to go somewhere there would be so many people. Even if he'd attended the tournament, he would probably have gotten dizzy in the crowd and

simply collapsed.

"He's one of the prime movers. I doubt he's doing any other work."

"You're certain it will be all right?" Baryou asked in a concerned tone as he disappeared once more behind his screen. Maamei could hear him shuffling through papers; evidently he wouldn't take this as cause to slow down.

"All right or not, he brought it on himself."

Kan Lakan, the so-called eccentric strategist, and the Moon Prince did not seem to get along very well. Perhaps that was why Lakan had been the chief culprit among those foisting their work on this office. Pushing it right back on him had been Maamei's main job recently.

"I must say, I'm surprised," she said. "I never expected him to actually *do* the work we sent back his way." Yes, the bargain had been that the strategist could have his tournament venue in exchange for doing the work, but considering who they were dealing with, she'd assumed he might find some way to weasel out of it. "And here I had another plan cooked up in case he didn't play along." Her strategy to have his every meal changed to carrot congee—in other words, simple harassment—was all for nothing. It was worth noting that the intelligence regarding Lakan's distaste for carrots had come from his adopted son.

"They say he's been sleeping half as much as normal. Grand Commandant Kan, I mean," Baryou said.

"What, really? I hadn't heard that."

"Sir Lahan was here while you were out, sister. I heard him speaking quite volubly to Master Jinshi."

"Whose side do you suppose he's on?" she said before she could stop herself. Lahan had, after all, given her information as well. "I hope the commandant's health isn't in danger." It had been quite some time since they'd started sending him his work.

"I'm given to understand it's not a problem. He may sleep half as much as normal, but he was sleeping half of each day to begin with."

"Like a baby, he!"

Baryou's face appeared again, reproving her for such a disrespectful way of talking. Maamei, for her part, had two children, and would have been very happy to have a child who slept so much. Incidentally, the Moon Prince had finally gotten his own sleep up to six hours a night. It spoke to how overworked he'd been.

The desire to help his own tournament succeed had made the commandant more malleable. And he had been told that permission for such an event would

certainly not be given if there were piles of work lying around. Thus, for some days now he'd been at it like a man possessed, so that the military camp was, for the moment, busier than usual. As a result, the Moon Prince was able to go home early from the office and even, wonder of wonders, take off today and tomorrow —his first vacation in months.

"I daresay it is odd, though."

"What's odd, Ryou?" Maamei straightened some papers against the desk as she spoke.

"I mean, why a Go tournament? I was under the impression Grand Commandant Kan was more partial to Shogi."

"But he's a strong Go player as well, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. So strong that it's said only the Sage can beat him. But still..." Baryou lapsed into thought for a moment. "At Shogi, no one at all can best him. He's a monster at the game."

"A monster?" Maamei asked. Baryou made it sound like the commandant walked another plane entirely.

"I believe the grand commandant sees a world we do not. One multifaceted and strange and full of wonders. Perhaps that's why he can't tell people apart— we're simply made of stuff too simple for him."

"You sound like you know him quite well." Maamei peeked around the barricade at her brother. He was ensconced in paperwork, which he continued to attend to even as they talked.

"The civil service is rife with such people. Those who see a world the rest of us aren't privy to. Sir Lahan might be the archetypal example. I was practically ordinary in that company."

"If you're ordinary, what in the world am I?"

"A sister, a wife, a mother. That's what you are."

"Perfectly common, wouldn't you say?"

She might be hard at work now, but she had children at home. It was all right; they were fond of their nursemaid, and had been weaned. Her husband was a soldier. At the moment, he was either hard at work himself, or sneaking a peek at the Go tournament; it wasn't clear. He was a good enough man to have granted Maamei permission to return to work, so she wouldn't press him on how he spent his days.

"The common is quite difficult... I envy you," Baryou said with a long exhalation. He took a piece of cut bamboo filled with tea and took a sip. The bamboo container was his choice; a tea cup was too likely to spill. He preferred

his canteen. “That’s why I don’t understand.”

Maamei was about to ask what it was he didn’t understand, but she stopped herself.

“Why would someone who’s not human have any interest in a tournament?” Baryou turned back to his work, looking for all the world like the matter genuinely made no sense to him. Maamei decided to take her cue from him and get back to what she was doing.

“I’ve something else to attend to, so you’ll be on your own. Is that all right? If you need anything, tell the guard outside,” she said.

“I know, sister. I know.”

Maamei left the office, though she didn’t feel quite right doing it.

It would have been nice to say that with the paperwork safely delivered to its respective departments, Maamei’s work was done, but she had one more task to attend to.

She headed for the Moon Prince’s personal pavilion, passing through a series of gates as she drew near the inner court. Each time she showed her permission and entered.

The comparatively sparse pavilion initially looked somewhat plain for the residence of the Emperor’s younger brother, but only the finest materials had been used; any bureaucrat who thought this place was too simple as good as proclaimed himself to be a man of new riches, blind to true wealth.

The guard at the pavilion let Maamei in as soon as he saw who she was. As she entered she was greeted by a pleasant, sweet aroma. She followed it to the kitchen, where she found an older woman with some baked treats in a square container.

“Welcome,” said the Moon Prince’s attendant, Suiren, with a smile.

“You must pardon the intrusion,” Maamei replied politely, and looked at the snacks. “These look delicious.”

“I should say so. They came out well, but I’ve made a number already and they’re not piping hot anymore. I’ve got some I made a few days ago as well—I was about to do a taste test to see which is the most delicious.”

“I’ve come at an excellent time, then.” Call it a perk of the job. Speaking of the job, though, Maamei mustn’t forget why she was there. She supposed it would be wrong to wonder whether she could take a few treats as a little gift for her children, but at the thought of how overjoyed they would be by the snacks, her own face softened into a smile.

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“Something on your mind?” Suiren asked.

“Oh, no. I was simply observing that you have some that are steamed and some that are baked.”

“That’s right. The steamed ones retained their shape better, but the baked treats do smell nicer.” Some of the treats were golden brown; they appeared to have been put in a mooncake mold and baked.

Suiren cut one carefully with a knife and offered some to Maamei. It was full of dried fruit, but the texture was somewhat different from mooncake.

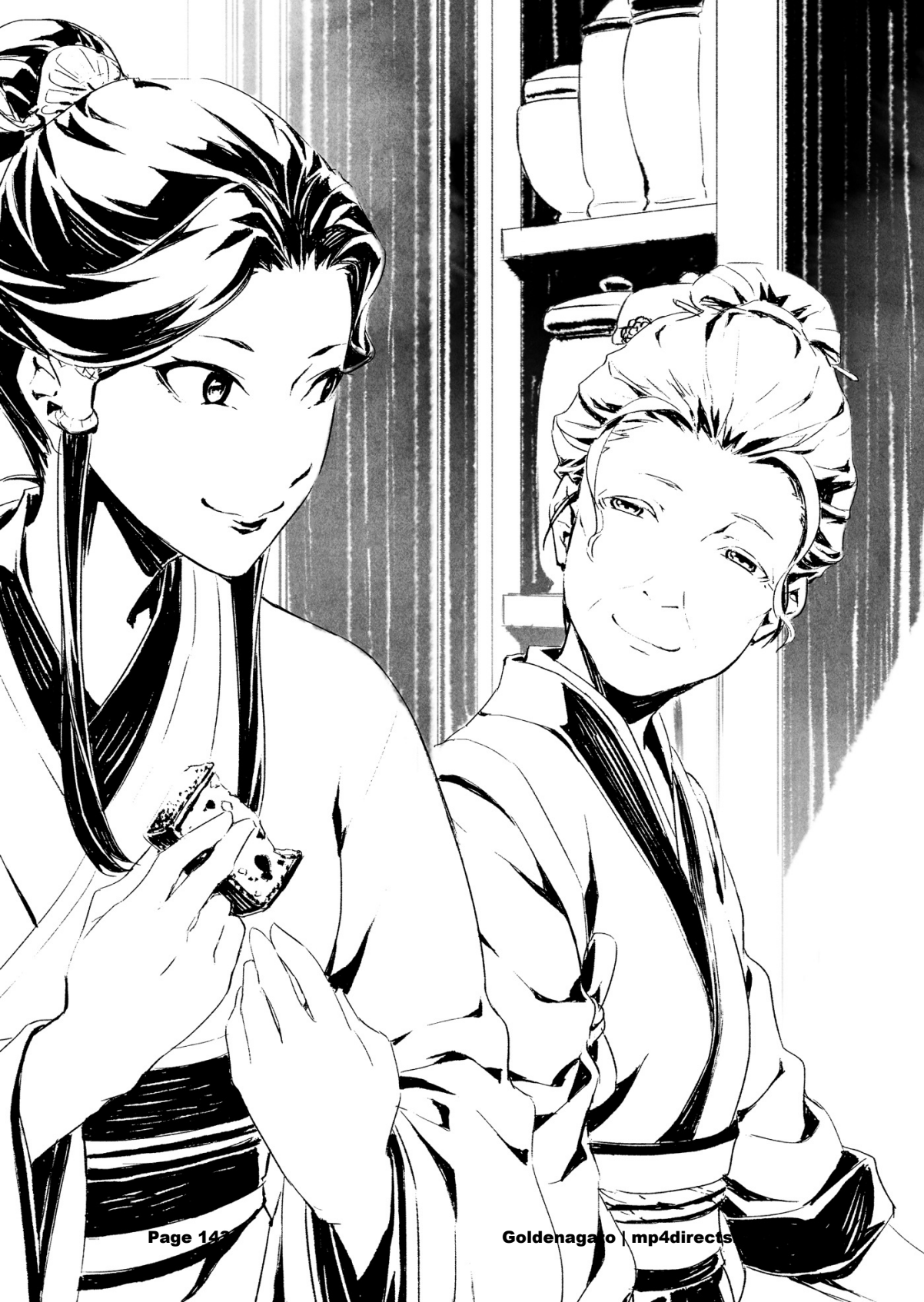
“And here’s this one,” Suiren said, passing her one of the steamed treats as well. This one was light and fluffy, but it came at a cost in fragrance.

“Do you suppose you could bake them, but almost *as if* you were steaming them?” Maamei asked.

“I had the same thought. Yes, that would be perfect.” Suiren took the treats in the square container, cut them, and gave some to Maamei.

“I think I prefer this one,” the younger woman said; she could hardly keep a smile off her face. It was soft and fluffy, but it had walnuts that gave it a pleasing crunch, while the sweetness of jujubes and raisins filtered through. Maamei could smell butter in it, and there was another fragrance too.

“Now try this one; it’s been sitting for three days,” Suiren said, passing Maamei a piece of something else. She put it in her mouth and discovered that the flavor of the fruit had permeated the entire dough. There was a sweet sauce drizzled over the treat, perhaps to keep it from drying out, and it was thick and delicious.



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“Do you think I might take some of this home to my children?” Maamei asked. Horrified, her hand flew to her mouth, but the words were out before she could stop them.

“For your children? You can’t have those, I’m afraid. But take as much as you like of these.” Suiren opened a drawer to reveal a whole array of different treats, each made a slightly different way. How many snacks had she made? “What you’re trying now is something I’m going to serve to the little master tomorrow. But do come back another time and get more.”

“Y-Yes, of course...” With a touch of disappointment, Maamei put the rest of her treat into her mouth. It looked like she’d been summoned here today purely for this taste test.

“I was at a loss as to which was best, but now I’m sure. Thank you,” Suiren said.

“My pleasure. But this is all the work you needed done today?”

“It is. You should take a rest every once in a while. I know your children don’t take much minding, but if they don’t see you now and again they’ll forget who you are!”

That stung. Maamei liked her work, but of course she adored her children.

“Is the Moon Prince here, may I ask?” she said. If he was present, she felt she should pay her respects before leaving, but Suiren shook her head.

“He’s spent the entire day with the tutor, studying. Please don’t disturb him. Don’t worry—I know he has a busy day tomorrow. I’ll make sure he goes to bed early.”

“Oh. I was sure he must have gone to see the Go tournament.” Maamei knew the Moon Prince was devoted to learning, though, so the revelation didn’t strike her as particularly strange.

“Ah, yes, of course. He hasn’t been yet. But I’ve something more important to ask you about. Maamei, would you consider becoming the little master’s lady-in-waiting? I know what a diligent worker you must be, since he comes home early each day.”

“Lady-in-waiting? I’m sorry, but I’m not so sure... I do have children to care for.”

Becoming an attendant to the Moon Prince would mean spending all her time in Suiren’s company—and her own mother, who had been one of the Moon Prince’s nursemaid’s along with Suiren, had told her enough stories about the woman to make her think twice. As things stood, Suiren treated Maamei with professional politeness, but if Maamei started working for her directly, she could

turn truly fearsome.

“No? That’s a shame. I’ll just have to find someone else, then,” Suiren said, although she didn’t sound that disappointed about it. In fact, she already seemed to know who that someone else should be.

Suiren wrapped up the treats for Maamei, and the younger woman showed herself out of the pavilion. An appetizing scent wafted from the package, but it seemed somehow lacking compared to what she’d tasted a few minutes before. She puzzled over it as she looked up at the sky. “Looks like another clear day tomorrow,” she said, wondering if the Go tournament had been a success. Then she looked back at the treats, and when she pictured the joy on her children’s faces, she couldn’t help but smile.

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Chapter 16: The Go Contest (Part Two)

I want to go home, Maomao thought as she stirred a mixture of honey, ginger, and fresh-squeezed tangerine juice. She was at the same place she'd been the day before, the Go tournament, in a corner of the theater, making drinks as fast as she could.

She'd been on duty yesterday; she was supposed to be off today. What about her plans to hunker down in the dormitory and read the medical treatises Dr. Liu had lent her?

And to be here, of all places! Yao and En'en were there too; like Maomao the day before, they had been sent over by Dr. Liu, although since En'en enjoyed Go, she seemed to be having a good time. Maomao wished she could be working with the two of them, but her father had told her, "I need you over here," and assigned her to the theater. Need we mention the reason?

Maomao seethed as she remembered when she'd been dragged in here yesterday. When the old fart spotted her, he set up a ruckus, just like he always did. Let's say that it had fallen to Maomao's father to talk him down and leave it at that.

There was a panoply of Go boards set up in the theater. In the spectator seating, people who had been victorious outside faced off with each other, and those who continued to win could ascend to the stage. Only a few people had made it up there the day before, so the freak strategist's matches had been separate. More people were reaching that coveted platform today, and at that moment the freak was taking on three people at once.

One might expect that to be confusing, but it was very much in character for the strategist. He could hardly get by in day-to-day life, but he sent his opponents away from their boards one after another with their heads bowed. He would occasionally shoot little glances in Maomao's direction between moves, but she ignored him.

"Everything ready, Maomao?" asked Yao, coming over with a kettle.

"Yeah, here. I need more tangerines, though; I'm all out." She poured the honeyed drink into the kettle.

"Sure thing."

“Also...”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to sit somewhere else.” She felt bad staying inside while Yao and En’en had to rush in and out constantly.

“Oh, it’s okay. It’s no problem.” Yao pounded her bountiful chest as if to say: *Just leave everything to us!* “I’m more worried about our snack supply. Is it holding up?” As the girls went around to see if anyone was feeling unwell, they also handed out snacks to the participants. The entrance fee seemed to have been calculated to cover the cost.

“I’m not sure, but I expect it’ll run out in a hurry,” Maomao said with a look in the direction of the freak strategist. He had a mountain of mooncakes and bean buns beside him. Playing board games took a lot of brainpower, which made a person want sweets. That seemed to be one of the justifications for handing out snacks, but Maomao sensed Lahan’s hand in this plan: the buns and mooncakes were both filled with sweet potato.

Sweet potatoes weren’t widely available in the public markets. This was presumably part of his plan to spread them around. They were sweet enough that by including them in a recipe, you could reduce the amount of sugar you needed, making the overall cost of ingredients cheaper.

It wasn’t just the tournament participants who could enjoy the treats either—stalls had been set up to hawk them to other visitors, who could buy them if the flavor appealed to them. He had been very thorough.

“How are things outside?” Maomao asked.

“No real problems. A few fights broke out when people kept losing, and some kids have fallen down because of the crowds and hurt themselves.”

“Fights?” That was to be expected. You couldn’t have this many people in one place without a bit of commotion.

“It didn’t get worse than a few bruises. The soldiers are all hanging around here, so they broke them up right away. I guess that sort of counts as working.” Yao didn’t look very impressed. She took the full kettle and said, “Sweets and tangerines, then, right?”

“Yes, please.” Maomao watched her go.

“’Scuse meee! Miss? I won!” someone called from the entrance. Maomao went over to check them in, thinking to herself, *They could at least hire one receptionist!* As for Lahan, who had delegated all this work, he was nowhere to be seen.

Maomao collected the name tags of the new guy’s defeated opponents. In this

tournament, when you won, your opponent gave you a tag with their name on it. Collect three such tags, and you could enter the main tournament venue. Not all victories were equal, however. Some people simply kept working over weaker opponents. That wasn't technically against the rules; when Lahan had been asked about it, he'd said, "If they paid the entry fee, I don't care."

Doesn't really matter. If they aren't that good themselves, they'll find out in here. If you lost, you had to go back out to the square and start again. Maomao gave the newcomer a fresh tag, a drink, and a mooncake. "There's someone waiting for a game in the seats to the right. You can go ahead and start playing against them."

You didn't get to pick your opponents. The guy in front of Maomao looked less than thrilled about it, but he sucked it up and went over to the seating area. If he'd breathed one word of complaint, Maomao would have had him out of that theater on the spot: her father as well as several of the freak's people were stationed around, just to make sure the eccentric didn't get up to anything.

"Excuse me," said a man hesitantly approaching Maomao. "Do you think I could ask for more mooncakes?"

He wasn't a participant—he was the freak's minion, a man who had recently replaced Rikuson as the strategist's aide. He was of average height and build; he didn't look very soldierly. This was the same man who had been at his wits' end when the strategist had managed to poison himself with his own juice. Rikuson had been a pretty-boy but could be firm when push came to shove; *this* guy looked far easier to push around.

"All right," Maomao said, although her expression was one of exasperated disbelief: had he already gone through his entire supply? She brought out some buns, making it obvious what a chore it was. "Here you go."

"Er, n-no, I..." The minion appeared to be trying to come out with something very hard to say. "Perhaps...you could bring them to Master Lakan yourself?"

Maomao was *absolutely silent*.

One look at her inspired him to backpedal. "S-Sorry! You're obviously very busy! I'll take them myself." At least he was quick on the uptake.

"Maomao..." someone behind her said sadly. She found her father standing there. "Don't make that face."

"What face?" She brought her hands to her face and found that her temples were tense, her lips twisted back hideously. "Oh. Sorry," she said to the subordinate.

Her father, meanwhile, looked toward the infamous old fart. "Has Lakan

been feeling unwell?" he asked.

"You can tell?" The minion looked at him. "In joyous anticipation of this tournament, he's been—very uncharacteristically, I must say; most strangely; a veritably unbelievable tale it is, yes—but Master Lakan has been working relentlessly."

Maomao was quiet. Just how little work did the bastard normally do?

"He normally arrives at the office sometime around noon, then shows himself out again before the sun sets, but recently he's been at his desk as much as anyone else—and he hasn't even been napping!"

"The boy is indeed working hard, then. He typically sleeps away half the day," Luomen remarked. So what it came down to was that the freak was finally shouldering a normal workload.

Maomao's old man continued to look fixedly in the strategist's direction. Evidently the freak was looking fatigued, not that Maomao could see it. He got so into his games of Go that it was hard to tell.

"I suppose it's back to work tomorrow, but might I ask you to be so kind as to afford him some time to sleep? When he doesn't get enough rest, his powers of judgment decline precipitously," Luomen said.

"Judgment? Doesn't he usually just flail around?" Maomao grumbled, provoking a melancholy droop of the eyebrows from her old man. He'd always had a soft spot for that freak.

"I'm going to go check on things outside, Maomao," he said.

"Got it. I'll call you if anything comes up." Or flag down the nearest soldier. Maomao assumed she and her old man were here because Lahan had calculated that they would serve as a useful bulwark against the freak strategist. The fart was behaving himself at the moment, and Luomen evidently thought it was more important to see if anyone outside was feeling poorly. "Go slow all right? There's a lot of people out there."

"I'll be fine." Easy to say—but her old man had a bad knee and walked with a cane. She munched on a mooncake and fretted about whether he would trip and fall in the crowd.

"They should've provided rice crackers too," she said. The mooncake was tasty enough, but it was too sweet. Maomao went back to mixing up honeyed drinks, still cherishing a wish for salt.

It was afternoon, and the numbers stood at: three people who had gotten sick from focusing too intensely on their games, two who had started fights over

allegations of cheating, and one child who had fallen down when he bumped into a gawking bystander. The number of people in the theater waxed, waned, and waxed again. Some of them showed up two or three separate times.

"Sure he's not cheating?" Maomao hissed to Lahan after she admitted one man for the fourth time.

"Nothing of the sort," replied Lahan, who, as the organizer of all this festivity, was looking quite pleased with himself.

Because you're raking it in, I'm sure. The entry fee was a pittance, but he must have other ways of recovering his investment. Maomao scowled at the tousle-haired man with his round glasses. "And here you're making me work for free."

"No, you'll be getting compensation. I've confirmed that we're in the black." So she'd guessed right about the source of his good mood. "That man you just admitted is a professional. Winning three games against amateur opponents is the work of a moment for him. Though he's been reduced to playing in the corner of a pub to earn his drinking money."

"Hm." Maomao demonstrated the extent of her disinterest by checking their remaining stock of buns and teacups.

"You could afford to act a little more engaged in a conversation, you know. Couldn't you muster a 'Wow, really?!' or 'You know everything, don't you!'? Maybe 'That's my honored older brother for you!' Where's the *love*?"

"You really think you'd feel flattered if *I* said any of those things?"

"Point taken. I would feel thoroughly mocked."

Which, as far as Maomao was concerned, meant that it was better not to engage in fatuous flattery in the first place. "It hardly matters. I don't think you're the type to let your guard down enough for anyone to insinuate themselves with you that way."

"A most perceptive little sister, you are."

Maomao ignored him. He'd come out of his mother with his mouth open—she knew if she tried to argue, he might never shut up.

Lahan, evidently disappointed by the lack of further grist for his chatter, spread his arms and shrugged his shoulders. "His racket might be winning wagers on Go games now, but he was once an instructor of the highest degree," he said. In the past tense—as Maomao had somehow expected.

"Let me guess. Some worthless old coot made mincemeat of him and he lost his job."

"Right on the money. Evidently some bigwig who wanted to take my

honored father down a peg induced the instructor to play a game against him, with the result that the man lost miserably."

"What a shame for him." It had to be demoralizing, fighting your way up so many times only to be beaten back down. If it really cost ten silver pieces to challenge the strategist, Maomao feared the man would go bankrupt.

Quite suddenly, she was struck by a bad feeling. "I don't suppose it's possible that the horde of challengers in this tournament is made up largely or entirely of people with grudges against the old fart?" That would explain the need for extensive security.

"You're half right. Someone might make a run at him at any time—that's why the guards never rest—but as long as they don't stab him straight through the heart and kill him in one blow, my honored uncle should be able to do something to save him."

"Of all the stupid, trivial reasons to summon my father!" She slammed her foot down on Lahan's toes.

"Ow! Ow ow ow ow! Stop that!"

Realizing that another injury would simply increase her workload, Maomao relented. "And what's the other half?" she asked.

Lahan held his foot gingerly and made a show of rubbing his abused toes as he said, "Only the Go Sage stands any realistic chance of victory against my father in this game. If any other player *could* beat him, even if they had to use this tournament to do it, it would certainly get my father's attention."

"Get his attention. Yes."

They were dealing with a man who saw other people's faces as nothing more than Go stones. Even the thought that he might remember someone was more than enough to play upon.

"Well, that rumor took on a life of its own," Lahan said, his already narrow eyes narrowing even further behind his glasses. "Until people were telling each other that if you could defeat Kan Lakan at a game of Go, he would grant any one request you asked."

Maomao's jaw hung open and she couldn't seem to get it to shut. "I've never heard anything so absurd in my life! Who the hell got that idea? And where the hell did they get it?"

"One wonders." Lahan didn't quite meet her eyes, leaving Maomao with a near certainty that he was the source of the rumor. Given that it was his money tied up in this venture, it seemed he was prepared to do anything he could to recoup his investment.

“And just look at all the greedy schlubs who believed that story,” Maomao grumbled. At just that moment, a new competitor came in.

“Is this where I check in?” the newcomer said, and their voice was like heavenly music drifting down from above.

Very silently, Maomao looked up and found a man wearing a stuffy-looking mask. The corners of his eyes were crinkled in a smile. On the reception table in front of her he’d laid his opponents’ tags, proof of victory in three games. Lahan gave the man a careful look. He presumably knew who it was—and seemed to think the mask was a shame.

“Here. Your participation prize.” Maomao gave him tea and a mooncake, but she couldn’t shake a sense of unease. She remembered what he’d said the last time they’d spoken.

“I’ll take the tea, but I’ll pass on the snack. My attendant will bring some for me; just bring it by later.”

“All right,” Maomao said after a beat. It was all she *could* say, knowing whom she was speaking to. “Then please line up over there and wait for a game.”

Lahan was positively beaming. If there was a pretty face around, he didn’t care if it belonged to a man or a woman. “You’re right. Greedy schlubs, and gullible too.” He looked at her as if to say, *How about that?* He looked so pleased with himself, in fact, that she felt compelled to stomp on his toes again.

In his first game in the theater, the masked man, a.k.a. Jinshi, found himself matched against a plump middle-aged man, who gave his masked opponent uneasy looks throughout the game. Jinshi won easily.

“I’d heard he wasn’t bad, but it turns out he’s very good,” Lahan commented.

“You think?” Maomao said. She’d served Jinshi for a time, but she didn’t recall him playing that much Go. He was an accomplished enough person to know the basics of the game, maybe a little better than average. “You sure that guy he was playing against didn’t just suck?” Jinshi had won so handily that one could almost have suspected the middle-aged guy of getting here by foul means.

“Yes, perhaps. A lucky draw,” Lahan said.

Jinshi bowed politely over the board, then headed to his next opponent.

“You’re not going to punish the guy for cheating?” Maomao asked.

“If he wants to come back, he’ll have to pay the entrance fee again. Why would I drive off a cash cow?”

Maomao didn’t say anything to that. Lahan was hopeless.

“Oh, I’m *joking*,” he said. “However he got here, if he coughs up the coin, he can face my father. Where’s the problem?”

“I thought they had to win before you squeezed even more money out of them.”

“Teaching games are a different matter from a proper match. Although it’s an open question whether my father understands what it means to teach. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure En’en gets her game another day.” Lahan was taking quick glances in the strategist’s direction.

“Another day? I thought it was supposed to be later today, after this was all done.”

“Yes, well. I think he might be reaching his limit. My guess is that he’ll go right to sleep as soon as the tournament is over.” Lahan began working his mental abacus.

Maomao’s old man had said that the freak slept away half of every day, but to drop off the minute his work was done? A child could stay awake better than that. Maomao had heard about an illness that caused sufferers to fall asleep unexpectedly, but that didn’t seem to be what was going on with the old fart.

Meanwhile, Lahan was muttering to himself. “If we tell those who have already paid that he’ll visit another day—no, that we’ll bring him to them individually—that would be a problem. There has to be some way to knock him out, then wake him up again... No, that won’t work...”

“Blinded by the gleam of money, eh?” Maomao gave him an exasperated look, then turned to watch Jinshi, who had found his next opponent. “He won’t beat that one,” she said: it was the pro from earlier.

She kept one eye on their match, wondering absently what had moved him to take part in this tournament. A crowd was gathering around the board; a man in a mask aroused curiosity.

Maomao knew a thing or two about Shogi, but not so much about Go, so she contented herself with doing check-in and keeping an eye out for anyone feeling poorly. *I wish people would tidy up after themselves before they go,* she thought, spotting crumbs on a number of the seats. She was just cleaning them up when there came a disappointed groan from the spectators surrounding Jinshi. Much of the crowd consisted of other players who had given up any hope of victory in the tournament.

Maomao went over to Lahan, who had worked his way in among them. “What happened?” she asked.

“He played a decent game, but this was just the wrong opponent. He’s got

him on the run now."

In other words, Jinshi had lost.

"I see," Maomao said, nodding. About what she'd expected. "No hope of an upset?"

"It's conceivable, but unlikely so long as his opponent doesn't make any serious mistakes. And I don't think this is someone who's likely to make enough of a rookie error to exploit..."

Just as Lahan said that, there was a buzz in the crowd. The mask, so out of place here, came off. Lustrous black hair danced in the air, accompanied by the wafting aroma of perfume worked into elegant robes. It was like a heavenly nymph descending from the clouds, robes fluttering... A risible analogy, but inescapable—because it was true.

Haven't seen that *for a while*, Maomao thought, observing a sight she'd witnessed ad nauseam in the rear palace: Jinshi at his sparkliest. There was a collective intake of breath; people wanted to gasp or exclaim, but the sounds caught in their throats. The figure before them was like a dweller in the heavenly realm, normally seen only in picture scrolls.

He was so lovely that at first glance one might have mistaken him for a woman, but the lump in his throat and his broad shoulders gave him away. There was a modicum of disappointment to be detected amidst the breathless amazement: on Jinshi's right cheek was a scar that would never fade, like a scratch on an otherwise flawless gem.

Jinshi's beauty had been exceptional even among the many and varied flowers of the rear palace. Here, it was more than enough to stun the onlookers into silence.

I'd forgotten his looks were enough to be downright hazardous to the health. When Jinshi placed a stone on the board with a firm, clear click, he looked the quintessence of a man playing Go. The crowd reacted to each move with an appreciative "Ahh!" Maomao wasn't sure what had inspired Jinshi to take off his mask, but it clearly threw his opponent off his game. The other man had been well in control until that moment, but now his face was pale.

Had Jinshi turned the game around? Maomao wondered. No, not as such; not yet. But if it was true that Jinshi's opponent had once taught Go to the nobility, then he would know something about the inhabitants of the royal palace. Perhaps he had met Jinshi, or perhaps he simply suspected, by reputation, who the man with the scar on his right cheek was.

There's a chance for victory there.

The crowd in general didn't seem to have realized who this gorgeous character was. Rumors about the Emperor's younger brother receiving a scar on his right cheek had made the rounds of the populace, yes, but they didn't suspect that he would be here, now, playing Go.

There were a few besides Jinshi's opponent who recognized him, though, and to a person, their faces were busy changing colors, flushing or paling. But none of them could say anything; their mouths worked open and shut like fish.

As long as he doesn't make a serious mistake, huh? Maomao thought, but then Jinshi's opponent did just that.

Face bloodless and fingers slick with sweat, the man lowered his head. "I've lost," he said. He was shaking—because of the mistake, or because of the fear that he had unknowingly offended Jinshi?

I feel kind of bad for him, Maomao thought, but she could only offer him her silent sympathy.

Why had Jinshi been wearing that mask? If he wasn't going to keep it on, why not just go without it? Surely he hadn't worn it specifically so that he could reveal himself and rattle his opponent at an opportune moment?

That's a dirty trick, Maomao thought—but Jinshi had won his second game. A win was a win; he hadn't broken any rules.

Dirty his tactics may have been, but Maomao was reminded that Jinshi had always been willing to stoop to such levels. He'd milked that face of his for all it was worth in the rear palace, convincing palace ladies and eunuchs to bend over backward for him. Why should he scoff at such methods just because he had a little worldly power now?

He's really here to win, Maomao realized. Was he that desperate for a game with the freak strategist? Maomao gave him a look: he hadn't seriously bought into Lahan's rumor, had he?

She suddenly felt a shiver down her spine. She turned to discover a bestubbled old fart looking in their direction from the stage. It was the strategist.

"Step away, Maomao, if you'd be so kind. My honored father can't concentrate on his game," Lahan said.

"Sure."

"But he *has* learned to distinguish the Moon Prince."

"You mean he couldn't before?!"

"I guess it's the scar that gives him away."

It was some burden, not being able to tell people apart.

Maomao went back to the waiting area, cleaning implements in hand. There

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was another young man at the reception desk, fresh from his victories outside, so she gave him tea and a snack. He could hardly have been more than twenty years old, and the naivete was written on his face. Maomao could see him clench his fist, his eyes wide and sparkling: he clearly believed his triumph had only just begun.

I feel sorry for this guy, Maomao thought. He had no way of knowing that his next game would be against someone roughly his own age, blindingly bright, who would break him like a brittle piece of kindling and send him home with his spirit in tatters.

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Chapter 17: Freak vs. Perv

This looks oddly familiar, Maomao thought as people crowded in to watch the pair on the stage: Jinshi and the man with the monocle. Between them, only a Go board.

Maomao had once faced the freak in a best-of-five contest of Shogi, which she had managed to win through sheer duplicity. But this? *He's got no chance.*

What did that mean? Had Jinshi really wanted nothing more than to play a game of Go against the freak? The application of a sufficient amount of silver would have solved that problem. That implied that at the very least, he wanted a proper match against Mr. Monocle, not a teaching game.

Until shortly prior, the freak had had several opponents lined up across from him, but when Jinshi appeared, they took the hint and vacated their seats.

Who knew how word had spread, but even outside the theater people were pressing forward, trying to get a look at what was going on. They probably would have liked to come inside, but several off-duty soldiers idling about had blocked the entrance, and the would-be onlookers went away glumly.

Look who's the star of the show, thought Maomao. This seemed likely to be the day's final match. Keeping one eye on the game from the safe distance of the reception desk, Maomao started counting up their supply of buns. Even if someone showed up now, they wouldn't have a game to play, so she figured it was safe to clean up. Maybe she could take the remaining treats with her for a snack at the medical office. No point letting them go to waste.

That was when she heard someone say, "Excuse me?" She looked up and found herself meeting the gaze of a woman with piercing eyes.

"I'm afraid we're done for the day," Maomao said. Maybe she hadn't *technically* been told that the tournament was over, but the woman didn't appear to be a participant anyway. She had someone familiar with her.

"Are you a friend of Master Basen's?" Maomao asked.

"She's my older sister," Basen said brusquely. The woman gave his head a shove.

Wow. No mercy.

Basen's forehead smacked the edge of the desk so loudly that Maomao

expected to see a dent when he got up.

"I thank you for all you've done for the Emperor's younger brother, foolish though he may be," the woman said. "My name is Maamei." She smiled genially, but there was still a whiff of something predatory in the expression. She could smile all she liked, but her actions (such as smashing her brother's head into a desk) spoke louder than her words. If she was Basen's older sister, that would make her Gaoshun's daughter, and it seemed she was just as Maomao had been told—a personality as severe as her beauty.

So this is the woman who infamously dismissed her own father out of hand. She didn't remind Maomao much of either Basen or Gaoshun; perhaps she took after her mother.

"I've come to deliver something the Moon Prince left in my keeping." Maamei handed Maomao a package from which wafted a sweet aroma.

Hoh! What have we here? The nose-tickling fragrance was almost too much to resist. Even Maomao, with her distinct preference for savory treats, wished she could try a bite of whatever was in there. Jinshi had said something about snacks coming by later—so this was what he'd meant.

Maomao looked at Maamei. She was Basen's sister, and Basen himself was right there, so there was every likelihood the snacks were safe. Professionally, though, she wasn't sure she could simply let Jinshi eat them in good conscience. "May I check the contents? Just to be safe?" she asked.

It's certainly not *that I just want to try some.* She had no choice; she began to reach for one of the snacks.

"If you wish to check them for poison, be my guest. Lady Suiren made them specially herself, so I can vouch for the flavor."

If they were really from Suiren, then all the more reason to trust them. The old lady, with all her wiles, was a chef to be reckoned with.

"If I may, then." Maomao opened the package. She found palm-sized baked treats each individually wrapped in oil paper. She took one of them out. The smell only intensified as she removed the packaging. The aromas of fruit and butter were prominent.

The dough was fluffy; it seemed like it could crumble in your hand. It wasn't packed full like a mooncake—this was a snack that would sit lightly in the stomach.

"Huh!" The first bite made her blink in surprise. Maomao might have preferred savory things, but she knew her way around sweets as well. The flavor of raisins permeated the entire pillowy creation, accompanied by the pleasant

crack of walnuts. But there was also another flavor, something unexpected, tucked among the rest; that was what really put this treat above and beyond.

Before she knew what she was doing, Maomao found herself reaching for another one. “No! Not for me,” she told herself, shaking her head. Then to Maamei, “That’s Lady Suiren’s work all right. I doubt there are many chefs in the palace itself who could come up with the likes of that.” Maomao had tasted food at the Verdigris House and royal consorts’ tea parties, and it was fair to say her palate was somewhat jaded, but this was enough to wring praise even from her. This dessert would not have been out of place on any table in the world.

“I very much agree. I managed to wheedle a few out of her—my children were very happy indeed.” Maamei smiled, and there was a hint of pride in the expression.

“They’re all right, sure, but are they really that good?” Basen interjected.

“Those with uncultured taste buds should stay quiet,” Maamei said.

“You do seem like you’d be the unimaginative type when it comes to flavor, Master Basen,” Maomao added. Basen looked a bit put out. Maomao turned to Maamei: “You may go right ahead and take these to Master Jinshi,” she said, hoping to get Maamei to do it for her so she wouldn’t have to get anywhere near the freak.

Maamei, however, replied, “I couldn’t. Surely they wouldn’t want any unauthorized personnel going up on the stage. I think *you* should take them.”

“Perhaps Master Basen, then,” Maomao countered. He was Jinshi’s personal assistant; surely that would be okay.

“It would be my pl—” Basen began, but he was interrupted by the dull thump of his own head hitting the desk again, courtesy of Maamei. That would be two dents, then.

“*You* take them, if you would be so kind,” Maamei reiterated. “By special request of Master Jinshi himself.”

“Very well,” Maomao said finally. She took a plate and put one of the treats on it, albeit without much enthusiasm. The plate went on a tray and the tray went in her hands up to the stage. As she pressed her way through people whom she’d seen only at a distance until that moment, she found that there were two others onstage besides Jinshi and the old fart. One of them was Lahan, who unlike Maomao understood the niceties of Go. He was staring intently at the board, sliding his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he watched.

The other man she didn’t recognize. He was in late middle age and dressed sharply; his outfit suggested a member of high society, but he didn’t seem like a

bureaucrat. *Cultured dilettante, maybe*, she thought—he exuded the aura of someone who walked not in the ways of vulgar and worldly men.

Several off-duty soldiers surrounded the stage, acting as impromptu guards, no doubt to keep the crowd from interfering with the game. Maomao went up to one of them and told him to call Lahan over.

"What do you want?" Lahan snapped.

"I've brought snacks for Master Jinshi. Incidentally, how's the game going?" She couldn't see it very well from the reception desk—and she wouldn't have understood it if she could.

"Can't say yet. Master Jinshi's comported himself well enough; he's stuck to joseki. Since he's holding the black stones and there's no komi, I suppose he technically has the advantage. So far..."

"So far?" Maomao repeated. Lahan sounded partial to Jinshi to her ears.

"It's in the middle game that my honored father turns truly frightening. He comes at you like a storm, with plays you won't find in any joseki pattern. Komi or no, he could very well turn this game on its head."

Maomao thought she understood, if only in vague terms. The freak strategist was not the kind who got by on his profound knowledge of tactics; rather, he acted on instinct, flashes of inspiration that often, for reasons that eluded her, seemed to be exactly the right thing to do.

"Having said that," Lahan said, looking puzzled, "my father's play seems slower than usual."

"Hm," Maomao said. She didn't care. Whichever of them came out on top had nothing to do with her. It might even be more interesting if Jinshi won. Spectators were always more raucous when the underdog prevailed. It continued to bother her, however, that she still had no idea why Jinshi was even playing in this tournament.

"Who's the other guy?" Maomao asked.

"That *personage* is the Go Sage. His Majesty's own tutor in the game," Lahan said. Maomao recalled that he was the one person in the nation generally held to be a better Go player than the freak.

"Whatever," she said. "Just take this to Master Jinshi, all right?" She tried to shove the tray of snacks into Lahan's hands, but he refused to take them.

"You were asked to do it. Take them yourself. Put them down anywhere there's room. Just not too close to the bowls—I'd hate to see someone reach for a stone and pick up a snack. Or vice versa."

"Fine," Maomao grumbled, and ascended the stage with a studiously neutral

expression. The crowd stirred at her arrival, but when they saw the tray full of treats, they decided she was just a server and of no interest. The freak alone grinned widely when he glanced in her direction; she paid as much attention to him as the spectators did to her.

Anywhere there's room, huh? she thought. Easier said than done. The stage was occupied by a Go board and two players, bowls placed by their dominant hands—the right for Jinshi, the left for the freak. The result was that both bowls were on the same side. Maybe she should put the snacks by the freak's right hand and Jinshi's left.

She found, though, that there was already a large plate heaped with buns and mooncakes. He'd even taken over what should have been the space for Jinshi's refreshments. Maomao didn't say anything. Even if she shoved the pile of snacks aside, there would be nowhere to set down these new baked goods. Left with scant choice, she put them on the other side, between the bowls. Equidistant from each of the players, in hopes that they wouldn't mistake the treats for playing pieces.

The instant she set the tray down, a hand reached out, took the snack, and in the same motion returned it to a stubbled mouth, into which the treat disappeared in an act that was as much absorption as eating.

Maomao continued to say nothing, and to feel nothing but disbelief and maybe some disgust. The freak strategist had helped himself to Jinshi's food without so much as a second thought.

He chewed, swallowed, and then licked the grease off his fingers. He followed this up with a look at Maomao like he wished he could have more, but there was nothing she could do for him.

"Maomao," Jinshi called. The strategist's face squinched into a scowl at that. Jinshi had lately, at long last, begun to call her by her name, but something felt odd about it this time. "If you would bring more snacks," he said.

"Yes, sir," she said, eventually. She planned to put everything that was left on a plate, although she had a strong suspicion they would all end up in the strategist's mouth. She'd been hoping there might be at least one left over that she could appropriate, but it seemed it was not to be. Maybe Suiren would let her in on the recipe someday. She shuffled back off the stage, wishing the game would hurry up and be over.

After the hubbub of the theater, it seemed awfully quiet outside. There was a chill in the air; the sun was on its way toward the horizon and soon it would be dark. The competitors had packed up their Go boards, and the vendors had

closed up shop. Only in the theater did the fervor for the game remain, and then only in the form of Jinshi and the freak's one-on-one showdown.

Wonder if they've all been laying bets on it, Maomao thought, wishing that she could have put some small change on Jinshi—the decided dark horse—if they were.

Both siblings, Basen and Maamei, had been in the audience when she left, but when she got back she found only the younger brother. Maamei had slipped out on the grounds that her children were waiting for her.

Maomao also found Yao and En'en, who'd finished much of the cleanup and were watching the game. En'en's eyes were sparkling. Maomao had to admit that seeing so many people so involved in something that interested her so little did make her feel left out.

The audience watched with bated breath—and then a cheer went up from the crowd.

Is the game over? If it was, then she wanted to hurry up and go home. She turned toward the stage—but found the two combatants glued to the board just like before. She glanced around, then went over to Yao and En'en. "Is the game done?" she asked.

"Not yet," Yao said.

"It's not—but there might be a forfeit coming soon," En'en said. She pointed at the wall of the theater, where there was a big piece of paper with a Go board drawn on it. Beside it, Lahan wielded a brush, drawing in the stones as they were played. A nice way of making the game easy to see from a distance. Funny he never seemed so considerate in other matters.

"Let me guess. The challenger?" Maomao said.

"No... The Moon Prince looks like he might win!" En'en said with a shake of her head. She sounded spiteful about it, maybe because Jinshi had dared to pry her away from Yao. It proved that there were people in this country who despised Jinshi for entirely nonpolitical reasons. "I think Master Lakan's last move was a critical mistake." She looked like she couldn't believe it. Maomao, for her part, would endure the utterance of the loathed name.

"How so?" she asked.

"Master Lakan always chooses high-risk strategies. It's like running across a tightrope—it might be the shortest distance between two points, but if he loses, it's never by a hair. It's because his foot slipped. It's when he makes a move there's no coming back from."

"Does any of this make any sense to you, Maomao?" Yao asked.

“Not a bit,” Maomao replied. Yao didn’t seem much more interested in Go than she was—but she *was* interested in looking at Jinshi. There was a faint flush in her cheeks, but she muttered, “No, no, stay focused.” For the moment, it seemed, she intended to live for her work. En’en looked at Jinshi with even more venom than before.

“Let me put it this way,” she said. “Master Lakan self-destructed.”

“Ah! That makes sense,” Maomao said. She could easily imagine the freak strategist doing that.

“To turn this around, he’s going to have to make even riskier, more aggressive plays... But he seems to be feeling really poorly today.”

Maomao paused. En’en was right: the strategist’s face was pale, and he looked lethargic, maybe sleepy.

“He’s been working hard for once in his life,” Maomao remarked. Jinshi had, it seemed, given him a great deal to do in order to procure his tournament. “And I gather he’s been sleeping a lot less than usual.” Granted he normally slept *more* than the average person, but she remembered all the times she’d told Jinshi, pulling another all-nighter, that lack of sleep was bad for decision-making. “And he’s been playing Go for two straight days.” Including, at times, against three or four opponents at once. That much thinking would certainly tax a person’s brain.

And there was one final factor.

“Maybe those snacks have something to do with it,” Maomao said, thinking about the treats Maamei had given her. The soft, rich dough; the fragrant dried-fruit filling. They’d been delicious. But it wasn’t simple culinary virtue that had enabled them to overcome even Maomao’s usual aversion to sweets.

I know what the “secret ingredient” was. A little distilled alcohol.

There’d been just a hint of it amidst the smell of butter. Most of it would have burned off in the cooking process, but some would have been absorbed by the fruit, where it would remain. It wouldn’t knock the strategist out, perhaps, but he was a cheap enough date that it would make him a little tipsy.

Don’t tell me, Maomao thought. Had Jinshi planned this? If he had, then Lahan’s instructions not to put the snacks too close to the bowls were cast in a new light. Had he been angling to get her to put them within arm’s reach of the freak? He would have known that if Maomao brought treats, the strategist would horn in on them.

Maomao put a hand to her forehead. They’d well and truly used her. True, it hadn’t done her any harm, but it still pissed her off.

How’d he get Lahan on his side? Behind his luscious looks, Jinshi was

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starting to seem rotten to the core. To say nothing of the question of how ready Lahan was to sell out his own family members. *I'd better get at least one good medicine out of this.*

She couldn't help wondering why Jinshi was so desperate to win. What would have caused him to lay such elaborate plans? With the freak strategist involved, though... She suddenly got a very depressing idea.

No... But if not, why else would he drag so many people into his little scheme?

Maomao was still thinking when she heard the click of the strategist's stone on the board. *I guess this game is as good as over.*

She was stewing, in a bleak mood, when someone flung open the door to the theater. Footsteps pounded as a self-important-looking man in late middle age raced into the building, dodging past the guards who tried to stop him at the entrance. "Dr. Kan!" he shouted. "Is Dr. Kan here?!"

The yelling was indecorous, but behind the newcomer Maomao saw two faces she recognized. Or rather, one face, because it was the same face.

"I know them..." It was two of the three brothers she'd helped investigate.

Her father, who was sitting on a chair beside the stage, stood up. "What's the matter?" Leaning on his cane, he began to make his way forward. The newcomers evidently felt he wasn't moving fast enough, though, because they pushed through the crowd to meet him in the middle. Maomao wanted to go over to him, but when she saw the soldiers standing nearby, she stopped.

"This is *your* fault! My son... My son!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Luomen said. "What's happened?" True, the man *was* lacking one of his sons. What had happened to the third boy?

"This!" The man put something wrapped in cloth on the table—then opened it to reveal two human fingers.

The crowd started screaming. The man, meanwhile, was still yelling: "I order you to find my son! If he dies, I'll hold you responsible!"

Chapter 18: The Fingers' Owner

The enraged interloper was the father of the notorious triplets; his name was Bowen. The characters meant something like "the cultured specialist," but he was far from the calm, composed person his name suggested. His tirade was so disruptive, in fact, that the competitors were forced to abandon their game. Bowen seemed cognizant of Jinshi and the freak, but he felt his situation was more important.

"These are your son's fingers?" Luomen asked. The spectators had been sent home after all the commotion, and now only the event staff remained. Maomao couldn't imagine the freak would normally have tolerated such an interruption to his game. Maybe he really was feeling unwell. Somewhere along the line, he'd fallen asleep with his face on the board.

His aide was currently tending to him in a corner of the theater. He looked at Maomao as if begging her to come and look after the strategist in her father's place, but she gave him a glare that kept him quiet. Instead, En'en and Yao took over the strategist's care. It was arguable whether they were "involved" in the event or not, but nonetheless, there they were. Unfortunately, that meant Maomao couldn't very well slip away either.

Yao looked like she might swoon at the sight of the fingers on the table. She was getting used to dealing with injuries, but severed bits were still hard for her. Between the interruption and the condition the freak was in, the conclusion of the game seemed likely to be postponed.

"Don't worry, I recorded the state of the board," Lahan said to Jinshi. "We'll continue when things have calmed down somewhat." Jinshi didn't look entirely comfortable with that. He'd been on the cusp of victory, even if he had been forced to exploit his looks and do every merciless thing he could to get there.

Then again, even the freak probably can't come back from a deficit like that. Lahan seemed to be angling for his "honored father" to lose. He was the kind who would sell his blood father and grandfather, so what was one adoptive parent to him, if the price was right? *Maybe I should be looking into this*, Maomao thought—but no. It seemed likely to be a very long story.

She was more concerned with Bowen, who was still laying into her father;

his own sons were restraining him.

"Perhaps you could explain what exactly is going on," Jinshi said. The three intruders were obviously out of place, and if Bowen was going to turn violent, he could hardly be surprised if he was held back. Jinshi was sitting at the board, brought up short by this turn of events. His game was going for naught, and he looked like he was struggling to make sense of it. "Let's hear it," he said. "You may as well have thrown a bucket of cold water on me. I assume you have a good reason?" There was an uncharacteristic tremor of anger in his voice.

Hard to blame him, after all the prep he did for this.

Despite his own fury, Bowen retained enough of his faculties not to defy Jinshi. He was struggling to speak, though, so one of his sons spoke up from behind him.

"We can't find my older brother. We can't find *er ge*!"

Er ge: that is, "second brother," the middle of the three sons. He'd been the one recently accused of assaulting a young woman. Since this man spoke of the second son as his older brother, he must have been the youngest son.

"No one's seen him for three days. And then this morning, this package arrived at the house," said the other son, who by process of elimination must have been the eldest. He opened the package again. The fingers belonged to a grown man—the absent second son, if what they were suggesting was true. The oldest had a red scratch on his palm—had he been hurt?

"Let me inspect those," Luomen said.

"Who the hell are you?!" Bowen demanded, but Jinshi growled, "Shut up and let him look." He gave Bowen a glare that silenced him.

Maomao wasn't precisely *involved* here, but she knew the circumstances. The same was true of Yao and En'en. But there was someone else there as well. *And I'm not sure about letting him stick around.*

It was the so-called Go Sage who'd been observing Jinshi's game. He sat on his chair, looking supremely disinterested. He appeared so far above it all, in fact, that Bowen and his sons said nothing to him. Perhaps they wished to—there were probably a great many things they would like to get off their chests—but with Jinshi watching, they knew they had to collect themselves and explain.

Bowen took a deep breath and took up the story. "Thanks to *you*, my son was arrested. Worse, people came out of the woodwork with accusations about things he'd supposedly done to them in the past."

Well, whose fault was that? The two remaining sons each looked away. No doubt they'd endeavored to pin some of their own wrongdoings on the middle

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son. Bowen should take his complaints to the freak strategist—he was the one who'd dragged Maomao's old man into this. Or maybe he'd wanted to, but lost his nerve, and decided to take it out on Luomen instead.

Personally, I'd be a lot more scared of picking a fight with my old man.

Bowen was a father worried for his son, but all this paternal anxiety had come a little late. He'd always excused and protected his boys from the consequences of their debauchery. Had he not realized the lesson he was teaching them?

"And you think one of them abducted him?" Luomen asked.

"What else could it be?!" Bowen demanded, pounding the table.

"Do you have any idea who might have done it?"

"How should I know? Is it my job to watch my son every damn minute?"

Maybe it should be, Maomao thought. She looked at the fingers. The severed ends were already turning black. *We might have been able to reattach those if they were still fresh...*

Then again, she found herself wondering if they'd been cut off after their owner's death. She'd heard that the way a human body behaved when it was butchered differed depending on whether the person was alive or dead. She assumed her father could tell—and she thought his mournful expression as he looked at the fingers told the story.

There was something else too.

The nails have changed color. The nail bed had taken on a blue-black cast.

Quietly, Maomao tugged on Yao's and En'en's sleeves.

"What is it?" Yao asked.

"I just thought maybe we should at least serve tea. Help me out?"

"Oh, good idea."

They didn't really need three people to make tea, but Maomao knew that if she asked Yao, En'en would inevitably come along, and if she asked En'en, Yao would pout at being left out, so three people it was.

"Do we even have tea? I just remember a lot of ginger water," Yao said.

"We have some, but I think maybe something a bit higher quality is called for," En'en said with a glance at Jinshi. She knew who he was, so she wouldn't serve anything less than fit. She had no special affection for him, but she was a capable enough lady of the court to show the proper respect.

"Is he going to stay here?" Yao asked, looking at Jinshi too.

"Sticking his nose into random matters is sort of his hobby, so I think we're stuck with him," En'en said. She truly was merciless. But even as Maomao

thought what a callous thing that was to say, she remembered the many times she'd made similar remarks.

"We've got plenty of juice. Carafes full, all for Master Lakan. I'm not sure they're meant for any of the players or spectators, though."

"Juice?" Maomao scratched her chin. *That might be perfect, actually.* "Any grape juice?"

"Yes, I think so. Probably good stuff too—it was in a lovely glass bottle," said En'en, peeking behind the stage.

"Let's go with that, then." Maomao went to the backstage green room.

"Uh, should we ask for permission first?" said Yao.

"You said he's got plenty. He won't miss one bottle. Especially not since he's sleeping."

"Well, if Maomao says it's all right, I think we can trust her," said En'en, and with her agreement they began searching through the many gifts and goodies for their chosen libation.

When they got back with a cup for each person, they found the discussion continuing to go nowhere. Bowen was still yelling, and Luomen was still listening silently. Jinshi didn't appear to be doing anything at all; he was just sitting there, but from the way he played absently with the bowl of Go stones, he seemed to be thinking about his next move.

The Go Sage continued to wear an inscrutable expression. Maomao still didn't know why he was there. Lahan was there, too, but he was hustling to wrap up from the tournament. Not just to clean up the actual venue, but trying to figure out what to write to all those who had reserved teaching games with the strategist (and had already paid for the privilege).

"Here you are." Yao and En'en were passing out the drinks.

"Is this alcohol?" Lahan asked, suspicious, but then he gave the drink an exploratory sniff and realized it was just juice. He couldn't hold his liquor any better than the freak strategist. The cups they'd used were really for wine, so they couldn't blame him for wondering.

En'en went over to give a cup to Bowen's eldest son—but the next thing they all knew, the cup was flying through the air. Red liquid splattered everywhere, the metal cup rattling as it hit the ground.

"Brother!" said the youngest son, a pained expression on his face. En'en didn't so much as flinch, even though she was now drenched with juice. *Thank goodness that wasn't Yao*, Maomao thought—the idea of what En'en would

have done was fearsome to contemplate. She would certainly not have been the unmoved person she was now. Of course, she would never have put the young mistress within range of a known womanizer to begin with.

"Please pardon me," she said evenly. "I didn't realize it wouldn't be to your tastes." She began cleaning up. Maomao pointedly gave cups to Bowen and his other son. *I knew it*, she thought as she did so: the wrinkles in her father's face had grown deeper, and his brow drooped sadly. He would never fail to notice something that had occurred to her.

Luomen exhaled quietly and stood up from his chair. "Do you dislike grape wine so much?" he asked the eldest son.

"No," the man replied, but it took him a beat too long to answer; he sounded uncomfortable.

"I know it's your favorite," Bowen said, giving him a curious look, but then he went on, "But that's not important now. Find my son! Or else I'll—"

"There's no need for threats. I already know where your son is." Luomen shook his head and looked up.

"Wh-Where?! Tell me!"

"The boy you've lost—it's your second son, yes?"

"That's right!"

Even Maomao began to feel her mood growing heavier. As much fuss as Bowen was making, he really did believe his child was missing. But he was failing to understand one crucial thing.

He can't actually tell his own sons apart!

Luomen pointed at the eldest son, the one who had slapped the wine cup away. "You had best come clean now. How long do you think you can carry on pretending to be your older brother before someone notices?"

Both remaining brothers paled.

Maomao searched her memories. It had been a little more than a month ago that they'd interviewed the three brothers. She'd been busy writing things down, but she recalled that the eldest brother's complexion had been poor and that he occasionally twitched, reflexively clenching and unclenching his fist. She hadn't given it much thought at the time; she'd simply assumed he was in ill health.

"What is going on here?" Bowen looked at his boys, genuinely uncomprehending.

"It was your *eldest* son who disappeared. I think you should ask these two for the details," Luomen said.

"That's preposterous! You think you can get out of this by talking

nonsense?" He rose and made to grab Maomao's father, but a soldier intervened and stopped him.

"He's right! What you're saying is ridiculous!" shouted the youngest son, but his face was twitching.

Before she could stop herself, Maomao stepped forward. "Far from it. It's the truth—as you both know better than anyone." Then she thought, *Shit, now I've done it,* and tried to take half a step back.

"Perhaps you could explain what you're both talking about so that even one with my limited understanding can grasp it," said Jinshi, finally rejoining the conversation. Beside him, the Go Sage nodded. Jinshi had probably figured nothing would get resolved without his intervention. Certainly, it made everyone stop and collect themselves.

"My profound apologies. I never expected you to be here, Moon Prince," Bowen said.

"Well, I am. And you've interrupted my game. But so be it; the best thing for my curiosity at this moment would be to find out exactly what's going on. I understand what you're trying to say, but I'm going to need you to be quiet for a moment. This conversation isn't getting anywhere like this. And you two, behind him, don't get any ideas about slipping away." On that point, Jinshi was very clear. "Luomen. If you find yourself hesitant to speak, perhaps you'd allow your apprentice to do so? She's quite capable, and I believe she has arrived at the solution."

Maomao couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"And as a good teacher, you'll of course correct her answers if she's mistaken," Jinshi added.

"Maomao..." Her old man gave her a look that communicated that she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to.

I could just leave this to him. But her father was a kind man, too kind. He would feel an excess of sympathy for the suspects—even if they were two worthless brothers. Luomen was quick-witted, and might come up with some sort of mitigating circumstance that Maomao hadn't even thought of, something that would excuse the brothers from what they'd done. Or perhaps he would simply refuse to tell Bowen the truth. Just as he'd done in the case of the Shaonese shrine maiden...

Maomao stepped forward. "Very well."

Pondering where to begin, she turned and looked at the fingers. Their owner was already dead. Whether of natural causes, or murder—well, perhaps that

would be the place to start.

"I'd like to draw your attention to the fingernails," she said. They were discolored, and several white lines were visible. Severed fingers, however, are not a pleasant thing to contemplate, even for grown-ups. Yao appeared agonized, but she looked.

"The nails' coloration indicates contact with poison," Maomao continued. "Arsenic or lead, most likely."

Just like the owner of the makeup shop.

"Lead," Maomao repeated, and looked at Bowen. "Your eldest son had a penchant for grape wine, yes?"

"Yes... I can't deny it," Bowen said.

"And might I speculate that his tastes tended...cheap?"

She thought back to the notes she had taken at her father's request. The oldest son had spoken of going somewhere cheap to drink. And there was lots of cheap, delicious wine making the rounds of the city just then. Maomao had hoped to get a taste for herself, although sadly, she hadn't been able to.

If I'd taken a sip when I had the chance...

Well, she might have put the pieces together.

Grape wine grew bitter if stored for too long. The same fermentation process that produced alcohol, if allowed to continue indefinitely, simply resulted in vinegar. Wine brought from afar, over long distances and long times, could turn sour—but the stuff going around the markets was sweet.

Maomao looked at Jinshi. "Wine mixed with lead becomes sweet, yes?" he said.

"That's right, sir." He clearly remembered their conversation.

From this point, Maomao would have to speculate. Her father wouldn't be pleased, but she didn't think he would contradict her either. "Over the last several months, caravans have been bringing copious amounts of grape wine from the west. With such quantities, some of it will inevitably have gone bad."

"What are you getting at? Get to the point!" Bowen said.

"I thought I told you to be quiet," Jinshi snapped.

Maomao didn't want to skip straight to her conclusion—she wanted to lay out how she'd gotten there. "The bad stuff would be bitter—unsaleable. The dealers, who bought it on the cheap, would try to find some way to move the product. And what if there happened to be a ready supply of something that would make the alcohol sweet on hand?"

Maomao looked at her audience. Her father knew the answer, but chose not

to say anything. En'en probably saw what Maomao was driving at as well, but she was busy studying Yao, who was deep in thought.

It was Jinshi who responded. "We're ahead of that problem. The dealers who were using the makeup powder to sweeten their wine have been arrested. The only supply left should be whatever made it to market before they were taken in."

"Prompt work, sir."

He issued the ban, so of course he would connect the dots.

By mixing the lead into the wine, the wine would get sweeter. The merchants could combine two things that they couldn't sell to make something they could: cheap, tasty wine that delighted customers. Clients might have been less pleased had they realized they were being poisoned.

If they drank enough of it, the poison would begin to show in their fingernails. The eldest son had seemed out of sorts when Maomao had seen him. If he'd continued drinking the stuff after that, it could only have made things worse. The middle son, meanwhile, had been the picture of health, and as far as Maomao remembered, his fingers had shown no signs of imbibing the poisonous wine. Even if her recollection wasn't quite perfect, her old man certainly would have remembered.

"Human fingernails grow at a rate of roughly three millimeters a month. When I recorded his testimony, this young man's fingernails must already have been showing those white streaks," Maomao said.

She looked at her father. He looked uneasy, but nonetheless spoke. "One of the three young men we spoke to hid his fingers. The others showed no irregularities in their fingers or nails."

"Was there something irregular about the second son's fingers?" Jinshi asked.

"No," Luomen replied. "Hence, we can at least conclude that the severed fingers do not belong to him." That much, he said unequivocally. The fingers were something he could be certain about.

"Your eldest son seems to have been in considerable ill health these past months. My understanding is that he was frequently absent from work." This interjection came from Lahan, who had evidently looked into the soldiers' backgrounds at some point.

"It's always possible the fingers belong to some entirely unrelated individual, but given the circumstances, I think it's reasonable to suppose that they're your elder brother's," Maomao said, looking at the two men who shared his face.

“Perhaps someone mistook him for the second son and kidnapped him? In which case, why not simply tell them that they had the wrong man?” She gave them an exaggerated expression of puzzlement.

The two men said nothing, but looked at each other while avoiding Maomao’s gaze.

“Are you ready to admit that *you’re* behind this?” she said at length.

“Them?! You think *they* did this?!” Bowen exclaimed. At least he was easy to read.

“I do. Which raises the question, what did they stand to gain from staging such a spectacle? Perhaps it has something to do with their involvement in their own brother’s death.”

At that, everyone started talking at once. Only Luomen was quiet, looking gravely at the remaining two triplets.

“Wh-What are you talking about? You’re not making any sense!” said the alleged eldest son, probably in reality the middle boy. He was trying to feign ignorance—because he knew that if he admitted Maomao was right, it would all be over. Bowen continued to look at him with disbelief.

“I have a question,” someone said. It was the Go Sage, raising his hand for attention.

“Yes?” No one else said anything, so Maomao called on him like a teacher in a classroom.

“If one triplet started impersonating another, is it plausible that the third triplet wouldn’t notice?”

“Excellent question. No matter how alike the three of them may look, I don’t think they could deceive each other as to who was who. Even if they could confuse their own father...” That was a swipe at Bowen.

Of course, the truth would probably have come out eventually—sometime. No matter how much three people might look like each other, it didn’t mean they were identical in every way.

“May I take it, then, that the youngest brother was aware that the middle brother had become the oldest brother?”

“I’d say so.” Maomao kept one eye on the brothers. They seemed to want to object, but couldn’t find the words.

“*Why?*”

I think you know the answer to that, Maomao thought. One didn’t get to be a Go master by being stupid. The answer to his question was easy enough to explain to the others. She suspected it had all been deliberate.

“Because if the second son disappeared, all their sins could be expunged. Yes?” She looked at the eldest brother—no, the middle brother. He glared at her, but there was nothing he could say; he just clenched his fists.

“Is... Is this true?” Bowen looked at the boys.

“Can you really not tell? Can you really not discern one of your sons from the others?” Maomao said.

Bowen stared at them fixedly, silently.

“Maomao...” Luomen said.

“My apologies,” she said and stepped back.

“In that case, the remaining two brothers must know where their oldest is,” Jinshi said. At his remark, they found themselves compelled to speak: such was the power of his beauty.

“Wh-What happened to our brother...” It was the third son who spoke. “I... I didn’t do it! It was *er ge*!”

“Wha?! Traitor!” The second son grabbed the third by the collar.

“This is all your fault!” cried the youngest brother. “It was your mistake—grabbing some girl! Why couldn’t you have picked someone who couldn’t make trouble for us?!”

“You’re one to talk! You can’t *find* a mark who doesn’t become a problem for us!”

Talk about your sibling rivalries.

“I take this to mean the two of you killed your oldest brother,” Maomao said.

“Not me! *He* killed him!”

“No, *he* did it!”

It was impossible to tell who was accusing whom, anyway. Luomen, meanwhile, was staring at the fingers again; he had noticed another detail. In addition to the white lines, there was dirt under the nails. Maomao gave the fingers a questioning look. At first, they simply seemed dirty, but on closer inspection, she could see it was skin under the nails.

“I don’t think there’s any more talking your way out of this.” Maomao took the hand of the second son. He had a red scratch running the length of his palm, all the way to his wrist. As if someone had scratched him with their nails.

“I... I didn’t kill him! He fell on his own!” the second brother said, his face contorted. He was staring at the spilled grape juice.

“The wine—it was the wine! There’s been something wrong with *da ge*...” the third son hesitantly explained.

Between the two of them, the story came out: the eldest brother had been

unwell lately, and in poor humor to boot.

"He would suddenly fly into a rage or start shouting. But he wouldn't stop drinking."

Sometimes toxicity could manifest as instability in the personality. The state of the fingernails suggested advanced lead poisoning.

"Let *da ge* do what he wanted, I thought. It was nothing to do with me. But he set up such a racket that I grabbed my brother and we went to see our elder brother in his annex."

Their elder brother was in his room, throwing a fit. When the other two came in, he sprang at them.

"I shoved him away before I knew what was happening, but he came at me again." That was when he'd gotten the scratch on his palm. "I was trying to keep him off me... That's all I was doing!"

The man's brother had fallen backward and hit his head on a table.

"What in blazes?!" Bowen demanded, grabbing his second son. "Do you realize what you've done?!"

"What *I've* done? This is because you left us to fend for ourselves!"

Neither man precisely sounded laudable.

"I was going to call someone. But *er ge*, he said..." The third son looked at the second.

Let's tell everyone I *died. And I'll become our elder brother.*

They would need proof to make it happen. They buried the body, keeping only the fingers, which they cut off. All they had to do was write a threatening letter; any number of suspects would suggest themselves to investigators. The entire matter would be cloaked in confusion.

And so they did just that, cutting off their brother's fingers and sending the letter to their own household.

But they had to pick the fingers *to send.* Maybe it didn't matter—whether they'd sent his head or his feet, it would have been possible to spot the symptoms. Perhaps not if they'd chosen his ears.

They would have been found out eventually. They must really have felt their backs were against the wall. Maomao knew this was where she should feel compelled to pray for the repose of the deceased, but in this particular case, she couldn't let go of the feeling that he'd reaped what he'd sown. Her father, though, was gazing at the fingers, still distinctly grieved.

"You both are a disgrace! An embarrassment!" Bowen yelled.

"No more than you!" said the second son, pounding the table. "When you

realized you couldn't protect all of us, you decided to pin everything on me! But *da ge* was the worst of us! And *you*! *You're* no better! Who gave you an alibi every time you got handsy with Father's concubines?!"

So that's why the youngest son went along with this, Maomao realized.

"Is this true?!" Bowen demanded, rounding on the third boy.

"Oh, it's true!" the second son continued. "Our three-year-old sister you lavish so much love on? She's *his* child! Oh, how you've doted on your 'first daughter'—but she's your first *grandchild*!"

"*Er ge*! You swore not to speak of that!"

"Is this true?! I want answers!"

This is absurd, thought Maomao, and in all likelihood the others were thinking the same thing. *To cut off a guy's fingers after he's dead...* Maomao was of the belief that once someone was dead, he was dead; he wouldn't know what happened to his former body. Still, the sight of those fingers brought home what a reprehensible story this was.

He's not the one I feel the sorriest for, though.

That would be one particular nobleman, who was now looking quite frustrated, having made extensive preparations, used every means fair and foul to achieve his goal, and might even have done it, had his game not been interrupted.

Chapter 19: The Go Sage

Jinshi heaved a sigh and looked at the Go board, populated by all its stones. He recalled what his Go instructor had said the other day.

"I have to say, I think it's probably impossible." The man was the Emperor's own Go instructor, and in spite of appearances could be quite blunt. "You can't even beat me, not once. You've got no hope against him." Impassive, the Go Sage snapped a white stone onto the board.

"Grk," was the only sound Jinshi made. What else could he say? He'd thought he'd played a pretty good game, but with one move the Sage had unraveled all of it.

He'd known perfectly well it might turn out this way: he was a jack-of-all-trades, able to do most things to some extent. But at best, he was only somewhat better than average at them. He didn't excel in anything. Gifted he might be, but he was not a genius.

Still, it was better than doing nothing.

"You've got your joseki patterns down pat, I'll give you that. But get away from the prescribed sequence, and you've got no more imagination than the average player. You panic when confronted with a move you've never seen before."

"You don't pull your punches, do you?"

"I seem to recall that was what you wanted." The Sage took a bite of one of the buns Suiren had made for them. The snack might have seemed at odds with the elegance associated with the game of Go, but apparently a sweet treat was considered de rigueur among players. Thinking naturally caused a craving for sweets—or anyway, that was the logic by which a certain eccentric strategist justified his constant consumption of such treats.

For days now, ever since the Emperor had agreed to lend Jinshi his instructor, he'd spent every day after work feverishly studying Go.

Talentless.

Simplistic moves.

The dull play style of the overachiever.

Yes, the instructor had been perfectly merciless. Jinshi had said when they started that he didn't wish the Sage to spare his feelings, and the man had taken him at his word. When Jinshi asked whether the Sage was so cruel to all his students, he replied, "I choose opponents who can't punish me for what I say." He was very careful.

He also knew how to motivate a person: "You expect to beat that freak playing like that?"

Jinshi picked up a black stone and placed it on the board, unsure even as he did so whether it was the right move.

He was working with the Go Sage because he'd heard he was the only man who could beat the freak strategist (a.k.a. Lakan) at the game.

"So. You're convinced I can't win?"

"Completely convinced. You're much too forthcoming, Moon Prince. Far too much of a straight shooter." Somehow, coming from the Go Sage, this didn't sound complimentary.

"Be that as it may, I must find some way to best him."

"And I have come here to try to teach you how to do that. But it's absolutely hopeless." The Go Sage munched on another bun.

"Give me any chance, any way to win—even one time out of a hundred."

"When Lakan is *at his best*, even I'm lucky to beat him one out of two games. If I'm at my *very best* as well."

"I'm afraid I don't take your meaning..."

The Go Sage was better at the game than Lakan; that's why he was called the Go Sage.

"Oh, I think you do. Let me ask you this, Prince: do you think you could defeat a bear bare-handed?"

"Obviously not."

"How about a wolf?"

"If circumstances favored me, perhaps... But it would be difficult."

"A dog, then."

"I think I could manage, more or less."

It was a lesson that had been driven home for him while hunting: humans were surprisingly weak for their size. It was the use of tools that enabled them to survive; without equipment, even a stray dog might prove too much for an unarmed man.

"What would you need to be victorious?" the Go Sage asked. He placed a stone, earning another groan from Jinshi: his instructor had seen clear through

him yet again.

"To emerge unharmed? A gun might seem ideal, but I'm not sure I could hit the creature. I think I'd prefer a sword, something I'm used to. Or perhaps a dagger, and gauntlets to protect my arms."

With a sword, he would be able to hold his own, at least in a confined space. On an open field, it would be much harder. He would lure the animal somewhere its agility couldn't help it—then he would let it get a mouthful of his forearm armor, while he went for the throat.

"Your looks may be refined, but I see you're willing to use messy tactics if need be."

"It wouldn't be my preference. I'm simply not that skilled with the sword," Jinshi replied. Basen, he would be able to do a better job. He could probably face down that bear, Jinshi figured—but even he would come out of such an encounter gravely injured.

"Hmm. In that case, I have a stratagem that might just work for you."

"Stratagem?"

"Oh, it's nothing special. Just a way of tilting the odds in your favor." The Go Sage leered, and for an instant the calm, cultured aspect he presented to the world vanished entirely. "You wouldn't have to break any rules. For the rules don't apply to what happens *off* the board."

Jinshi swallowed heavily.

The Go Sage was unequivocal: "If this method doesn't work, you will never beat Sir Lakan so long as you live."

"I've lost..."

No matter how many times he counted and recounted the territory on the board, the captured stones, he couldn't make his numbers greater than his opponent's. The difference was only two points—but it might as well have been a thousand.

He had pulled out a seemingly unassailable lead in the middle game. His territory had been secure, and it hadn't seemed possible that the tide should turn. Nor had Jinshi made any obviously poor plays—and yet the honorable personage munching away at his snacks had proceeded to close the gap with blinding speed.

Basen and some bodyguards were standing nearby. It was several days after the Go tournament. Jinshi had been working away in his office when the monocled strategist had appeared with no warning.

“Let’s continue,” he’d said. Had he been simply shirking work, Jinshi might have turned him down, but it was lunchtime.

A Go board and stones were waiting at an open-air pavilion near the office, the board already arranged in the state it had been in when their game had been so rudely interrupted. A few onlookers watched from a distance, but Jinshi had no reason to send them away or to refuse this game.

Many a time since their standoff at the theater, he had considered what he might do to consolidate his advantage and seize victory. He couldn’t believe he could lose after holding such a commanding lead.

“Impossible...” Basen had said, astonished. Impossible: yes, that was the only word for it. What must it be like in that man’s head?

The Go Sage’s words rang in his ears: *“You will never beat Sir Lakan so long as you live.”*

Why had Jinshi’s instructor compared his opponent not to a man, but to a beast? Jinshi felt a pang of regret. A bear, a wolf, a dog: Lakan was none of these. He was a monster unto himself, a fact Jinshi had failed to appreciate.

Lakan adjusted his monocle, chugged some juice, and looked in all-around perfect health. He was getting enough sleep, and wasn’t currently exhausted by a relentless series of Go games. There was no alcohol in either his drink or his snacks, so his head was clear.

Jinshi felt unutterably low. He’d used the dirtiest of dirty tricks and he’d still lost. He wasn’t interested in putting on airs, but this simply made him feel too pathetic. If there hadn’t been an audience, he would have slumped face-first onto the board and groaned.

Jinshi marshaled his remaining dignity and tried to look unruffled. If there was one quality he felt he could boast of, it was the thick skin he’d developed during his time in the rear palace.

He had to keep his chin up. He had to act like someone who could take his licks with aplomb.

He was about to raise his head when a finger appeared on the board.

“This move, in the endgame. You should’ve played it over here,” Lakan said.

Jinshi looked at him, stunned. The freak was scratching his stubbly chin and continuing to point. “And this, here. Then white would’ve had nowhere to go...”

He was mumbling, making it hard to hear him, but he was unmistakably explicating Jinshi’s errors.

“Master Lakan, doing an analysis?” said the strategist’s aide wonderingly.

“An analysis?” The words sparked a hubbub among the onlookers.

“My honored adoptive father very rarely performs such postmortems,” said Lahan, who had appeared rather out of thin air. He must have come running when he heard the game was going to be continued, because he was slightly out of breath. “It must mean, Moon Prince, that you *have his attention*.” He emphasized those last words pointedly.

“Now, why’d I make this move? Hrm...” The freak seemed to be involved less in an analysis and more in a personal reflection on the game. He seemed to be talking about his crucial error; he didn’t understand why he had done it.

He remembered every move of the game, even though his brain had been addled with tiredness and fatigue and alcohol.

Jinshi could only laugh.

“In any event, that was fun,” the freak said, coming over to Jinshi. “I don’t know what you’re after, but your means were fascinating.”

And then, leaving the game board where it stood, he walked away, swinging his bottle.

Jinshi watched him go, dumbfounded. The crowd began to disperse. A few of the onlookers seemed to want to approach Jinshi, but Basen and the other bodyguards looked like they would be having none of it.

Only Lahan remained by Jinshi, just sort of standing around. Basen wasn’t best pleased by his presence, but he allowed it. He’d rarely, if ever, spoken to Lahan, but it didn’t seem like they would get along very well.

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“I can only apologize that my help wasn’t enough,” Lahan said. “At least my father seemed satisfied, I suppose.”

“Satisfied,” Jinshi echoed. “With my pitiful strategy?” He gave a sarcastic smile; he had a sense he was being mocked.

“The specifics of your plan don’t matter to him. If he says it was interesting to him, then it was.”

Jinshi didn’t quite follow. Lahan sounded like *him*—maybe it was his blood relation to the strategist, or maybe those with such unique talents inherently understood each other.

Jinshi finally decided to voice a question that had been bothering him. “Why did Sir Lakan want to hold a Go tournament at all? To be quite honest, I should think that he would play Go as and when he wanted, whether or not there was money involved.”

“Yes, and so I suppose he would, left to his own devices.” Lahan pulled out a book—the strategist’s Go book that had started this entire craze. “This book contains a great many records of games played between my honored father and a certain woman. Some of them are as much as twenty years old—the sequences of moves were still there in my father’s memory. This from a man who can’t remember who he saw yesterday! These games are priceless to him...and there shall be no more of them. This is all that’s left.”

“Ah...”

Jinshi had a reasonable idea of who the “woman” was: a courtesan from the Verdigris House, and Maomao’s mother. The year before, Lahan had purchased her at great expense, but in spring of this year, she had died.

“There will never be another quite like her. I think my father understands that... But perhaps he was hoping that, inspired by these records of past games, someone who played something like her might appear.”

“So he was trying to resurrect the past?”

“I think not. If anything, I believe he was trying to build a bridge to the future. Or perhaps my honored father doesn’t think that far ahead.” Lahan scratched the back of his neck, suddenly uncomfortable. “I do wish he would do postgame analyses of his other matches, as he did with yours. What if the people who paid for teaching games ask for their money back?”

“Teaching... Meaning?” Jinshi said. He did recall hearing that one could pay for the privilege of playing a game against the strategist—although most of those games had been postponed on account of Lakan’s indisposition.

“We’ve spent the last several days trying to mop up those teaching games.

Ugh, I don't mind telling you, accommodating everyone's schedules has been a nightmare. In fact, he was just playing a game against someone else, and when it was over he suddenly disappeared. Where should I find him but here?"

Hence the earlier shortness of breath.

"If I might venture a question?" Lahan said.

"Yes? What?"

"Was it the Go Sage who put that little ploy in your head, Master Jinshi?"

It wasn't really a question. The Sage had been at the tournament; Lahan probably knew perfectly well what had happened.

"I was borrowing time that was rightfully the Emperor's for my instruction," Jinshi said.

"Ah. Well, that makes sense, then," Lahan said and nodded. "My father often complains that there are only ever savory snacks on hand during his games with the Sage."

"Ah," said Jinshi. So the man really didn't want to go bare-handed against a bear either.

"Now, then, I believe I'll be on my way... Ah, one more thing," Lahan said, and smirked a little. "Those treats you brought the other day. My honored father seems to be quite taken with them. He'd like to know how to make them —*without* alcohol, ideally. Also, I know how he acts, but my father does hate to be in debt."

"He doesn't look it."

"It's true. Even if he may forget the debts he owes," Lahan said, quietly, pregnantly. Then he trotted off.

"That looked like quite a conversation. Is everything all right?" Basen asked, coming over to Jinshi looking somewhat disturbed.

"All right? We were simply chatting about the weather. Ask Suiren to write up the recipe for those snacks, would you?"

"Er, y-yes, sir."

"Without the alcohol. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Jinshi left the pavilion behind and Basen followed him, puzzled.

They found something at Jinshi's office when they returned.

"What have we here?" Jinshi asked. Basen took off the cloth covering the object to reveal a Go board of the kind used in formulating military strategy. It was a simpler version of something in the strategist's office—but when he saw

the arrangement on it, Jinshi raised an eyebrow.

"Doesn't like to owe favors, eh?" he muttered.

Jinshi had been a staunch advocate of the strengthening of the army because he foresaw trouble to Li's north and west.

Baryou poked his head out from his corner of the room. "A fine job he did of rearranging things, no? He's addressed everything you were worried about, Master Jinshi."

"I was hoping he might feel he owed me a *little* more than this."

Maamei entered the room with a sheaf of papers and immediately lit into Jinshi. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, but we still have work to do—the work left over from your little break. I do hope you'll hurry up and finish it. There are a great many ceremonies to be held at the end of the year, so I suggest you operate on the assumption that you won't be able to take any more vacations."

"Yes, I know." Jinshi smiled bitterly and resolved to do his work. There was certainly plenty of it. "Maamei," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

Jinshi recalled that there was one other matter he still had to attend to.

"I'd like to ask you to deliver three letters for me." He opened a drawer in his desk.

"Yes, sir. To whom?" She gave him a questioning look, and the questions only multiplied when she saw the addresses on the letters.

"As soon as possible, if you would—but in as much secrecy as you can. And have a carriage readied."

"Yes, sir." She was deft enough to see that this was not a matter she should pursue too closely. Instead she simply took the letters and left the room.

"I suppose it may be too soon, but so be it," Jinshi said. He had no special talents, and if he dawdled, he would be too late. He needed to make his move before that.

Still, he really—

"...*really* would have liked to have him in my debt." Jinshi let out a long sigh and sat back at his desk.

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Chapter 20: Check

It was the middle of the night, and Maomao was rattling along in a carriage. A letter had arrived for her after she finished work for the day—it was from Jinshi, and had been brought very discreetly.

I wonder what he wants.

His summons had never yet been good news for her, and she didn't have high hopes for that changing. But she was in no position to turn him down.

The last place they'd seen each other was the Go tournament. Much as she hated to admit it, having the freak strategist there had actually been comforting; she knew Jinshi couldn't pull anything in his presence. But now...

Wonder where I'm going.

A ride in a carriage usually meant she was traveling to the residence of someone important—Ah-Duo's villa, Empress Gyokuyou's palace, Jinshi's pavilion. But they were going the opposite direction from Jinshi's chambers now.

The more lavish the buildings around her got, the more profusely and unpleasantly Maomao began to sweat.

When the carriage reached its destination and she was invited to disembark, Suiren was waiting for her. "It's been quite a while," she remarked.

"Yes, ma'am," said Maomao.

"You'll have to excuse the lack of ceremony, but I'd like you to come inside and undress."

Maomao said nothing, just shuffled reluctantly into the building. One's body had to be searched upon entrance to the rear palace—was this something similar?

"Master Jinshi summoned me," Maomao remarked at length.

"Yes, and if it were only the young master, we wouldn't have to go through this silliness," Suiren replied. In other words, there was someone else here.

Suiren took Maomao's robe from her. From the folds she extracted a writing kit, a pad of paper, some medicine, and bandages, one after another, until she looked downright exasperated. "Do you always carry all this with you?" she asked.

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“I left my sewing kit at home,” replied Maomao. Meanwhile, she took off even her undergarment, leaving her scrawny body exposed to the cold air. She got goosebumps.

“What are you, a squirrel? Open your mouth; I’d better check your cheeks.”

As if it wasn’t bad enough to have to strip naked, now Suiren was peering around inside her mouth.

“Your teeth are very straight, Maomao,” the old lady-in-waiting observed approvingly.

“Hank hoo hery huch,” said Maomao.

“And your skin is so smooth. But perhaps you could remove this?” Suiren peeled back the bandage on Maomao’s left arm. Since Yao had forbidden her from hurting herself, it was in comparatively good shape.

“Why was I called here?” Maomao asked.

“Oh? You can’t tell me you have no idea. I wonder if you’re prepared.” She sounded teasing, but that actually set Maomao’s mind at ease.

“Is His Majesty present today?” All this effort to make sure she was unarmed suggested someone of considerable importance would be there. The searches in the rear palace had been rather simpler, but then, there had always been guards around there. She was given to understand that several were posted outside the room whenever the Emperor made a night visit to one of his consorts.

“It’s no fun teasing you, Maomao. Don’t you wonder if you were called here for a tryst?”

I can’t say it didn’t cross my mind. For all his faults, though, Jinshi typically went by the book. She wanted to think he wouldn’t do anything quite so abrupt. *Anyway, if that’s where this was headed, I would at least get a bath, not just fresh clothes.*

She passed her arms through the sleeves, then wiped away her freckles, dusting her cheeks with white powder. When she was done changing, she was brought to a door guarded by soldiers who bowed as she entered. There was another hall beyond the door, and beyond that, a room. Dim light shone by her feet, illuminating a single path, almost like it lit the way to some other world.

The room was warm inside; Maomao could hear the crackling of a brazier mingled with the chatting and laughter of three nobles.

“I’ve brought her, sir,” Suiren said; then she bowed and showed herself out.

Maomao was speechless when she saw who was there. Jinshi and the Emperor, she had expected. But not Empress Gyokuyou.

The space was actually two adjoining rooms, with the sliding door between

them open. The second room appeared to be a bedchamber, while the one in which the three august personages sat was equipped with a couch and table as well as a desk. They were remarkable furnishings, and a striking aroma drifted through the room.

What is *that smell?* Maomao wondered. It seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it. This being a room full of nobles, she hoped she could assume it was nothing dangerous.

"A most interesting company you've gathered, Moon Prince. Whatever do you have in mind?" Gyokuyou said, hiding her mouth with her sleeve as she laughed.

"I agree, and I wonder the same thing," the Emperor said jovially. "With *her* here, I'm sure it's something very intriguing indeed."

It feels downright...domestic here. What's going on?

No matter how you sliced it, Maomao was out of place in this room. Was she here simply to kick back and relax with the three of them? There were no ladies-in-waiting or guards that she could see, not even Gaoshun or Hongniang.

Keeping her head bowed, she puzzled over what she should do. Was she here to amuse the high folk? What ridiculous antics would she be put to?

Let me see if I can remember any good jokes from the pleasure quarter... No—Gyokuyou might enjoy them very much, but they seemed likely to fall flat with Jinshi. Those jokes tended not to turn out well for the men involved. Best keep them to herself.

If I'd known what was going on, I could have come better prepared. Maybe brought one of my "night visit" manuals.

No, that wouldn't do either. The Emperor enjoyed those books, but she couldn't be displaying them in front of Gyokuyou. And anyway, Suiren would have found and confiscated them during her search.

She was still wondering what she should do, what she *could* do, if there might be some entertaining little act she could perform—when she saw something that made her doubt her own eyes.

On a tray was a sprinkling of sand, upon which a branch and a stone had been placed almost carelessly. It seemed meant to evoke a garden—a little something to delight the visitors. But it was the materials of that "garden" that had Maomao's attention.

Velvet antler, long gu*, and...is that bear gall?!*

Velvet antler was the antler of a deer; *long gu*, or "dragon's bone," referred to large, fossilized bones; and bear gall was exactly what it said—the gallbladder of

a bear. All were medical ingredients of the most expensive kind. The antler was arranged to look like a tree branch, while the long gu were presented like rocks. Only the bear gall was just sort of...there, smack in the middle of everything. Had it been placed there specifically so that Maomao would notice it?

Are they mocking me? she thought. Surely they would have known that such a prize would never escape her notice, no matter how casually it was placed. She feared she might start to drool as she gazed at the medicines.

"Whatever do you have in mind here?" Empress Gyokuyou asked. "Is Maomao going to solve a fascinating mystery for us?" Her eyes were sparkling. Maomao had wondered if everything would be all right between them considering what had happened earlier, but judging by Gyokuyou's current appearance, it looked like everything was fine. She suspected it might be different among the serving women: Hongniang might cut her some slack, but Haku-u and her sisters were most likely less than pleased.

These were people who were skeptical even of Gyokuyou's half-brother. They couldn't have been happy that she was meeting personally with Jinshi, even if His Majesty was present.

Maomao kept one eye on Gyokuyou, but she let her gaze wander the room—and she soon found more medicinal goodies. The ink stone on the desk was actually donkey-hide gelatin, a dark lump of gelatinous glue. Among the tea leaves, she spotted mint and cinnamon. The unique odor wafting around the room must have been a combination of all these various medicaments.

"No, Maomao's role is yet to come. First, might I ask you to listen to what I have to say?" Jinshi smiled broadly and stirred the large brazier that stood by the far wall.

"I can do that!" Maomao said, her eyes sparkling. She was wondering if there might be something in the brazier as well.

"No, not today. I'm the one who summoned you here. And now I order you to have a seat," Jinshi said. He gestured to one end of the couch, and Maomao had no choice but to sit. The upholstered seat was stuffed with cotton, and it, combined with the warm room, made her awfully sleepy.

No! Gotta stay awake, she thought, giving her head a gentle shake and taking a breath. If a fire was left burning too long, the air in the room could get bad and make it hard to breathe. There were no guards in the room, and no windows either. Perfect for a secret conference. At least there were a few vents to allow air to circulate.

Maomao wondered, though, what this rich collection before her could mean.

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In fact, she questioned their presence, considering she had been subjected to such a thorough search. Too much medicine could be poisonous, and almost anything could be dangerous, depending how you used it.

Those white strips over there—is that poria? she wondered. They sat in a bowl with chrysanthemum petals scattered on top.

The medicines were displayed so conspicuously—could she take this to mean that they would be given to her later?

"So what is this mysterious thing you wish to say to us?" the Emperor asked, stroking his beard and narrowing his eyes. It was a probing expression, but there was a hint of kindness as well.

There was wine, with appropriate accompaniments, on the table. Maomao's eyes lingered on the alcohol, but it didn't appear there would be any need for her to taste it; the nobles were already pouring for each other.

Drugs are good... But I like wine too.

"Would you like some?" asked Empress Gyokuyou, who had observed Maomao studying the drinks. "This wine is very good. Isn't it, Majesty?" The Empress had weaned her child and could now enjoy some alcohol.

Yes! thought Maomao. Strictly speaking, her social position should have prevented her from drinking anything in this company. But if a superior invited her to a tipple, it would have been unconscionable to refuse. Yes, she had *no choice* but to imbibe.

"Indeed," the Emperor said. "This seems like good, true grape wine." The qualification suggested that talk of the poisonous wine had reached even the Imperial ears.

"I could never serve you anything poisonous, Your Majesty," Jinshi said. "I need you to live a good, long time." He gave his glass drinking vessel a gentle shake. So Maomao wasn't going to get any wine after all. Jinshi was seated and had taken off his outer robe. Maybe he was warm from the fire and the wine.

"Are you sure there's no cup for Maomao, Moon Prince?" Gyokuyou asked. Maomao looked at her with shining eyes.

"No, Maomao can't drink yet. She'll have work to do later."

Maomao's spirits plummeted. She turned a withering look on Jinshi, but he hardly seemed to notice.

"What work? I feel sorry for her, the only one left out of the drinking," the Emperor said.

That's right, you tell him! And order him to give me that medicine! Maomao clenched her fists triumphantly. But still Jinshi showed no sign of getting an

extra cup. Instead he said, “I have need of her, if I am to make my request to you about the future of the throne.”

“Now, now. All night you’ve been treating me like some doddering old man.”

“By no means, sir. But does Your Majesty share our former ruler’s credulity about mystical medicines that can prolong the life span or even confer immortality? May I presume not?”

Hey, they might exist!

Maomao was not pleased. True, no such medicine had yet been discovered—even the panoply of ingredients in this room couldn’t make one immortal.

Ugh, what’s he driving at? I wish he would hurry up and get to the point...

“I very much need Your Majesty to survive for at least another twenty years,” Jinshi said. The number was so precise.

“Moon Prince... You seem to have some very specific idea in mind,” Gyokuyou said. She couldn’t help being somewhat unnerved. The Emperor was currently in his mid-thirties, and was the picture of health. No reason he shouldn’t remain hale and hearty for quite some time.

“And what, may I ask, happens in twenty years?” The slightest edge had entered His Majesty’s voice. Maomao tensed in spite of herself. One couldn’t allow oneself to forget that this lushly facial-haired man stood at the very top of the nation’s hierarchy.

“That is when the Crown Prince will assume his royal title, and I can finally relax,” Jinshi said.

It was Gyokuyou who spoke. “The Crown Prince?” she asked.

“Yes, milady. At ten years old, he will still be a child. At fifteen, he will formally enter adulthood, but it would be hard to have full confidence in him at that time. By twenty... Well, he’ll still be rather young, it’s true, but if we ensure that he’s surrounded by good people before then, there would be no problem.”

What was Jinshi talking about? Maomao felt herself break out in goosebumps despite the pleasantly warm room. She might even have gone pale, had she not spotted some caterpillar fungus and *mu dan pi*.

The Emperor set down his drink and narrowed his eyes. He no longer looked in such a good mood. “Perhaps you’d care to tell us what you base this scenario on.” It wasn’t really a suggestion, and that was what made it so scary.

If you just called me here to listen to unsettling conversations, please let me go home...with souvenirs. Maomao wished she could plug her ears and hide in a corner of the room. Empress Gyokuyou was not looking much at ease, either.

She probably hadn't expected such an unpleasant topic in this company.

"My basis is this: if anything were to happen to Your Majesty at this moment, the court would expect and urge *me* to take the throne." Jinshi took a box, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, from the folds of his robes. Inside was a single golden pearl, about the size of a thumbnail, its surface flawless.

Pearls of such a size were extremely rare, especially in such fine condition. Even a layperson like Maomao could tell that a jewel like this would fetch a price that would make your eyes jump out of your head. Even the price of *zhen zhu*, a medical ingredient obtained by pulverizing pearls of lower quality, could do that.

"A rather rich accompaniment to send with the portrait of a potential match, don't you think?" Jinshi asked.

"I won't ask who sent it. I know you're too much of a gentleman to tell anyway," the Emperor said.

"Perhaps, but I imagine you can guess, Your Majesty."

You could probably count on one hand the number of people who could and would send the Emperor's younger brother a massive pearl in hopes that he would marry their daughter.

And if anyone with those sorts of resources is trying to forge a connection with Jinshi...

It would have to be either someone who stood to increase their own power from the match, or someone who sought to exercise indirect power through Jinshi. If the latter, success would put them on even footing with Empress Gyokuyou.

"And one more thing." This time Jinshi took out a spoon—it was silver, but the metal was clouded. "There has been poison in my tea at my office. And during one ritual, someone shot an arrow at me."

Did those things happen? Maomao thought. If they hadn't reached her ears, then Jinshi must have ordered everyone who knew about the matters to be silent. There were those who wished to make Jinshi an ally, yes, but there were others who saw him as an obstacle. Such was the world of politics.

"Would you happen to know anything about any of this, Empress Gyokuyou?" asked Jinshi.

"No, nothing," Gyokuyou replied, sounding faintly dismayed. No one believed the Empress herself was responsible for the attempts on Jinshi's life—but there was always the possibility that one of her relatives was acting without

her knowledge. That must have accounted for the tremor in her voice. And if some member of her family was involved, then her father Gyokuen seemed likely to have some part in the matter.

"Your Majesty, you well know that I have absolutely no interest in being emperor," Jinshi said, but the ruler did not nod at his words. "Otherwise, why would I have spent six years pretending to be a eunuch in the rear palace?"

Maomao couldn't stop herself; she covered her ears, but Jinshi, smiling, took her wrists and pried her hands away, placing them on her knees instead. He obviously wanted her to hear whatever he was going to say.

"I take no pleasure in such complicated matters," Jinshi continued. "You have two sons, Your Majesty. Sir Gyokuen has received his name. Perhaps you would take this opportunity to grant *me* a name as well."

Grant him *a name?* Maomao cocked her head. She looked from one of them to the other, trying to figure out what this might mean, and then her eyes met Gyokuyou's.

"To be granted a name is to become a servant of the Emperor. In other words, to leave the royal family," she explained. She still looked pale, and her words seemed to be less in deference to Maomao's ignorance than a way of asking Jinshi whether she had understood him correctly.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. No. Wait.

Maybe it was complex and, frankly, annoying, the maneuvering one had to do as a member of the Imperial line—but it couldn't be as simple as just asking to be let out of the family. For one thing, how many men were there in the Imperial family as it stood? The former emperor's siblings had all died of disease. There might be maternal relatives Maomao didn't know about, but as far as she was aware, the full complement of Imperial males included only the Emperor, Jinshi, Empress Gyokuyou's son, and another son born to Consort Lihua. Just four people—and the Emperor's sons were still infants. A baby might die at any time—you simply didn't know. No matter how diligently you cared for them, no matter how carefully you raised them, they might be felled by illness one day, just like that.

He'll never get his wish. If even Maomao knew it, surely the fact was not lost on the Emperor.

There was a clatter so loud it shook the large table, and Maomao felt her hair stand on end. Some meat buns rolled off a plate. The source of the shaking? The Emperor, who had pounded the table with his fist. His expression, usually genial, if noncommittal, was a mask of anger.

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Please don't!

Defying the Emperor could mean forfeiting one's life. But he was normally in such jovial spirits when Maomao met him that she had begun to lose her awe of him, just a tiny bit. Now she felt her heart race. She looked around the room, hoping that one of the herbs might be something that could calm an angry disposition.

Gyokuyou's face had gone white; perhaps this was the first time she, too, was seeing the Emperor in a fit of true anger.

Only Jinshi appeared unmoved.

"You promised, did you not? Or do you intend to renege, Your Majesty?"

"Think carefully. Is this the time or the place to say such things?"

"It is. If I don't settle this matter swiftly, I'll lose my chance to escape."

Don't pour oil on the fire! Maomao thought, as she felt herself start to sweat. She looked from Jinshi to the Emperor and back again, her eyes only occasionally wandering to the bezoar in the corner of the room. *I wish I could look at that bezoar all day.*

Sadly, her modest dream was crushed.

"Will you not make me an ordinary person?" Jinshi asked.

A *thwack* filled the room.

Jinshi sat down, face toward the ground. The Emperor's fist was trembling.

In spite of herself, Maomao went over to Jinshi and forced his mouth open. *No broken teeth, just a split lip.* Still, he'd taken a fully committed punch to the face. There would be swelling soon. Maomao wanted to check His Majesty's hand as well, but she dared not get near him.

"Is this why you insisted the apothecary not drink?" the Emperor asked, somehow managing not to shout. Gyokuyou gripped his wrist.

The room was intended for private conferences. The guards wouldn't come running just because somebody slammed a table. Gyokuyou couldn't shout, not even had she wanted to. If she cried for help, the Emperor himself might have stopped her.

"You needn't worry, Empress," Jinshi said.

The hell she needn't! Maomao thought as she wiped the blood from Jinshi's lip with a handkerchief. Had they called her here just so she could watch two brothers fight? If so, she wished they would have left her and Empress Gyokuyou out of it.

"I knew what I was walking into here. I'm prepared for much more than a bloody lip." Jinshi stood, removing another layer of clothing and walking step by

step over to the brazier. “Rest assured, Empress Gyokuyou: your enemy I shall never be.”

Jinshi smiled and loosened his belt, revealing his midriff, his belly button. No sooner had the belt come loose than he was picking up a poker from the fire. And then he did something none of them had expected, something none of them had even imagined.

There was a collective gasp and the stench of burning flesh. Even the stouthearted Gyokuyou swooned, and Maomao rushed over to catch her. The Emperor looked on aghast; he didn’t even try to cover his open mouth.

Jinshi fought the pain, forcing himself to smile. He returned the poker to the fire.

Maomao rested Empress Gyokuyou on a couch, then stared at Jinshi’s abdomen. He’d avoided his stomach, but on his flank, just above his pelvis, there was a burn. She recognized the shape: it was the crest Empress Gyokuyou had been given.

He won’t have damaged his internal organs. But—

But such a deep burn would leave a scar that would never heal.

I can’t believe he had that ready to go.

“Now, Empress Gyokuyou, I can never defy you. Even if His Majesty should depart this world, I cannot and will not threaten the Crown Prince.”

Maomao recalled a case she’d been faced with in the western capital: a bride who had faked her own suicide for fear of terrible abuse by her husband. The women of her family had long endured being branded like livestock.

To mark someone like a possession was as good as to make them your slave.

The Emperor didn’t say anything. His face, which had been contorted with rage moments earlier, was now blank, stupefied. He couldn’t have dreamed that Jinshi, the Imperial younger brother, would brand himself a slave.

There was only one thing for Maomao to do. The extremely high temperature of the burn prevented much bleeding, but it was still red and swollen. She doused her handkerchief in cold water and pressed it against Jinshi’s side. She looked around the room, searching desperately for oil and beeswax, and anything that could treat a burn. Angry that she had no tools to work with, she took an expensive-looking bowl off the shelf and started crushing the oil and beeswax together. She didn’t care if the bowl broke or the spoon shattered. She didn’t have time to care.

It might have been quicker to leave the room and ask somebody to get burn medicine, but that would expose Jinshi’s injury. Even though they had a room

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full of witnesses who knew that the brand was self-inflicted, it could only be dangerous for anyone in the wider world to be aware of the mark.

"You damned masochist!" Maomao grumbled as she prepared the oil-and-beeswax concoction. Nobody rebuked her. She was probably just saying what they were all thinking—perhaps including Jinshi.

Maomao heard a distinct thump, and discovered that it was the Emperor sitting down on the couch. "Did you really hate it that much? The idea of becoming emperor?" he mumbled.

"I always said I did, didn't I?" Jinshi replied, grimacing. "If you still insist on my remaining in the line of succession, I'll just have to make a nice, big wound in my left cheek too."

Maomao immediately clapped her hands onto the sides of Jinshi's face, but he smiled: "That was a joke."

She let go of his cheeks, but she couldn't let down her guard. There was no telling what he might do.

Empress Gyokuyou was woozy, but still conscious. Jinshi looked at her. "Empress, I know you were hoping Maomao could be your serving woman forever, but perhaps I could ask you to relinquish that dream. Now that I have this mark, I can't let just anyone see my body."

Well, whose fault is that? The salve was ready; Maomao rubbed some on Jinshi's skin.

"I can't even ask my lady-in-waiting to help me change my clothes now, let alone allow a doctor to see me. And above all..." He got to his feet, wrapping one arm around Maomao's torso and pulling her with him. The cloth that had been cooling his midriff slid off.

"W-Wait! Master Jinshi!" Maomao tried to fight him, but with his wound right there, she couldn't struggle too hard.

"My *wife* will have to be a woman I can trust implicitly."

That made Maomao go pale in a hurry. She looked up; from her place in the crook of Jinshi's arm, she could see he was wearing a fine smile.

"Is—Is that what you were really after?" Gyokuyou asked, scowling.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Jinshi replied, feigning ignorance even though Maomao was still tucked under his arm.

Maomao reached out toward the Empress, desperate for help. Gyokuyou, however, only gave her a pitying look and shook her head. "Maomao, I think you're half responsible for this."

How the hell do you figure?!

She wanted to protest her innocence, to say this had nothing to do with her. But Jinshi placed a hand over her mouth, silencing her. “And if you are responsible, then I must ask that you live up to that responsibility,” he said.

So there would be no help from Empress Gyokuyou. Maomao looked to the Emperor. He stared vacantly back at her and Jinshi. “Zui...” he said. “Is this the path you’ve chosen?”

“It is.”

“And you won’t regret it?”

“I won’t.”

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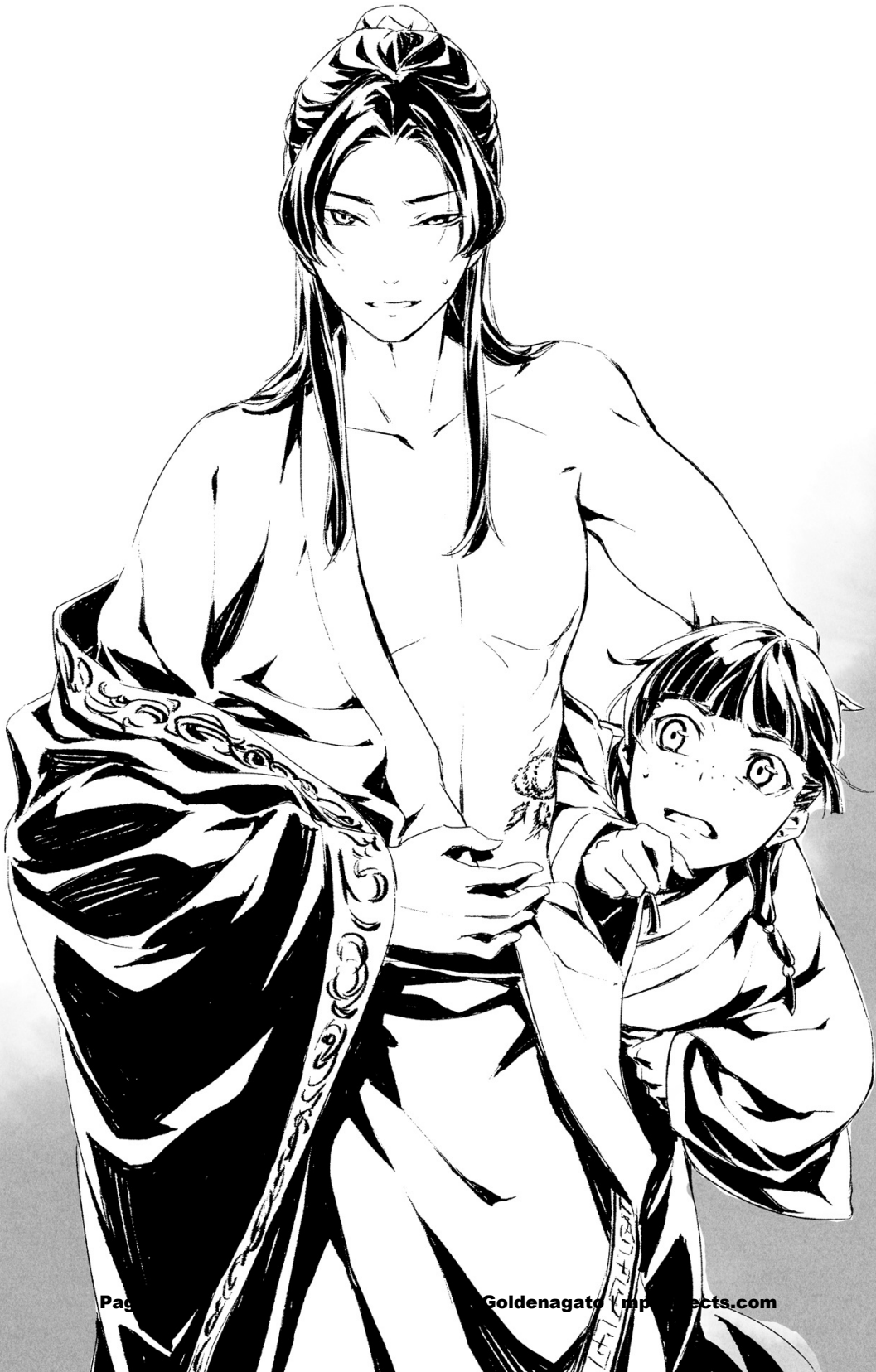

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There was a sadness, a loneliness, in the Emperor's eyes. For a moment it looked like the befacial-haired ruler was going to say something else, but then he spared an instant's glance at Gyokuyou and swallowed it. Instead he said, "I'm going back. My guards will get cold if they have to stand out there all night." The room was warm, but it was a winter's eve. "I'll let your people know that you'll be spending the night here tonight."

"My profound thanks for Your Majesty's consideration." Jinshi bowed deeply. His lip was still swollen, and Maomao hadn't finished attending to his burn yet.

"I'll go with you," Gyokuyou said, rising. She looked so tired—Maomao wished she would be able to get some rest, but that seemed unlikely this night.

Wait... Hold on a second. If the two august personages departed, that would leave her alone with Jinshi.

Her mouth hung open and she stared at him.

"You may drink *after* you've tended to my wound," he said. Sure, now he told her!

Maomao was desperate to leave the room with the Emperor and Empress, but she couldn't let Jinshi's injury go untreated. She hung there, stuck between a rock and a hard place, and also between Jinshi's torso and his underarm, when he finally took his hand away from her mouth. He reached for the long gu on the shelf. "I wasn't sure what would be useful, but I tried to collect as much medicine as I could," he said.

Maomao didn't say anything, but she felt her heartbeat quicken in spite of herself.

"You may use it freely. Any of it, as much as you like."

The momentary distraction prevented her from seeing Gyokuyou leave the room, her sleeves swinging. Jinshi seemed in remarkably high spirits for having been hit in the face and then inflicting a serious burn on himself.

"M-Master Jinshi. Let me finish treating you, quickly."

"The night is long still. We can take our time."

"No, I want to get this over with!"

Jinshi pursed his lips, and he still didn't let her go. "What *does* have you so displeased?"

"Displeased? I hardly know what's going *on*! Who presses a brand into their own side?!"

"A damned masochist, that's who."

His words, not mine!

He was turning the tables on her. His color was surprisingly good, though he must still have been in pain. Nothing about this made any sense. Then Jinshi moved toward the inner room.

"Where are we going?" Maomao asked.

"I'd like to get some sleep after I have been treated."

"Then let me finish treating you. *Here*."

"No, you can do it while I'm lying down."

Maomao wanted to turn violent but knew she still couldn't—meanwhile, this monster of bodily endurance loped into the inner chamber.

"Or don't you wish to accompany me into the bedroom?"

Now she really had nothing to say. She heard the teasing in his tone and glanced away from him.

Then she heard a long exhalation, and Jinshi said, "You don't have to worry. I understand." Then he stroked her bangs. "Anyhow, I'm told I'm only *decently sized*..."

Maomao almost choked. Jinshi's smile had never looked more wicked. Maomao, completely forgetting about Jinshi's injury, struggled mightily now, and who could blame her?

Even if it did cause her to miss what Jinshi said next, a quiet murmur: "I never did earn that favor I wanted."

Epilogue

Back at her residence, Gyokuyou didn't even take a bath; she collapsed straight into bed.

"Oh, but I'm tired..."

She wished she could ask someone what in the world had happened today. Some of it might have been downright funny under other circumstances, but any humor was far outweighed by shock.

Part of her certainly sympathized with Maomao, and at the same time, part of her was jealous.

She wished she could just bury herself under the covers and go to sleep. But she was the mother of two children. She had to talk to Hongniang, find out how the young ones were doing. And she couldn't go to bed without removing her makeup either.

"Better get to it, then." She sat up, trying to convince herself to feel better—but her efforts were undercut by something right in front of her eyes. A pillar, emblazoned with her assigned crest.

Was it true that Jinshi would never defy her from this day forth? It was not a pronouncement to be made lightly—and in front of the Emperor, no less.

Gyokuyou regarded Jinshi like a younger brother—but then, her only memories of her blood siblings were of them tormenting her. As Gyokuen's daughter, she'd been sent to the rear palace, seemingly nothing but a political tool—yet she discovered that she had far more agency than she might have expected. There were too many interesting things in the palace to spend her life acting like a doll.

Of course, there were things there that made her angry or upset. But that was no different from the western capital. No human alive could say their life consisted entirely of pleasures. There would always occasionally be things you didn't like; you just had to roll with them.

There was, however, a limit to what could be endured. Humans are creatures of profound appetites. If you were constantly negotiating and negotiating again with someone who refused to curb their demands—well, what happened?

"You only lose out, in the end," Gyokuyou said to herself.

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If you were lucky.

"You can only be destroyed."

And the other person might not even mean you ill. They might simply believe they're doing the right thing.

Gyokuyou's half-brother Gyoku-ou was such a person, a man who believed he was doing the right thing. He was convinced that everything that he believed was just was indeed so, and he was merciless toward those he saw as mistaken.

Which, from his perspective, included Gyokuyou.

If he thought she was wrong, or even evil, then why was he suddenly trying to bring her into his fold?

Gyokuyou opened a drawer and took out Gyoku-ou's letter. She blew on it once, her breath quick and sharp, then dropped it on the floor.

Let her be evil, then. She could live with that. But what of her children? The boy, Gyoku-ou might try to bring onto his side as well. But the girl...

Everyone said Gyokuyou had the same girlish heart she'd possessed all her life. But it wasn't true. Gyokuyou was no longer the headstrong child she'd been in the western capital.

"And I won't let you get away with this."

Slowly, deliberately, she ground her brother's letter under her shoe.

Which of them would be crushed underfoot in the days to come? They would see. *He* would see. She was no longer the girl who could do nothing but smile.

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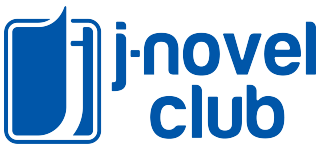

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